Barriers to Persistence in Adult Basic Education: The Experiences of African American Learners

Simone Thomas

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BARRIERS TO PERSISTENCE IN ADULT BASIC EDUCATION:
THE EXPERIENCES OF AFRICAN AMERICAN LEARNERS

by

Simone Thomas

A Dissertation
Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the
Requirements for the Degree of
Doctor of Education

Major: Higher and Adult Education

The University of Memphis
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DEDICATION

For Alana Simone, whose Spirit is with me always.

&

For those of you who were here at the start of this journey, but not for its ending:

Agnes Manning

Pearl S. Ray-Miller

Robert Little, Jr.

Dr. Reda Abraham
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ABSTRACT


One of the most pervasive issues facing educators and administrators in Adult Basic Education (ABE) is student persistence. The purposes of this qualitative study were 1) to identify the experiences that African American adult learners associated with their decisions to leave ABE programs; 2) to ascertain the impact of participants’ perceptions of participation in ABE relative to their self-perceptions and individual learning goals; and 3) to examine the extent to which barriers perceived by participants were consistent with barriers identified in the existing literature. Three research questions guides this study: 1) what experiences do participants associate with past decisions to leave one or more ABE programs; 2) how do participants view participation in ABE relative to their self-perceptions and individual learning goals; and 3) do participants perceive barriers other than those identified in the literature?

This study was guided by an interpretivist theoretical framework. It was conducted at a nonformal ABE program offered by a nonprofit organization. The participants were six African American learners enrolled in ABE at the time of data collection, each of whom had previously failed to persist in this or some other ABE program. Data sources included individual interviews, focus groups, classroom observations, artifacts, a research journal, and field notes.

Findings of the study indicated that African American ABE students perceived a number of barriers. Situational barriers included family obligations, health problems, and
work. Dispositional barriers perceived by participants were low self-efficacy, shame, and negative perceptions of racial identity. Age was identified as both a situational and a dispositional barrier. Lack of tutor persistence, lack of individual attention, embarrassment in the learning setting, and dissatisfaction with instructional options were structural barriers identified by participants. Additional structural barriers found included lack of cultural relevance in instruction and overemphasis on grammar. Boshier’s Congruence Model accurately predicted the participation decisions of three participants.

The study’s findings suggest that African American ABE students’ participation decisions are greatly impacted by their experiences in the learning setting and individual self-perceptions. Unavoidable life events and competing obligations also led to learners’ failure to persist.
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Chapter I

Introduction

“Those people don’t care about education, or are genetically unfit, or cannot even speak correctly, much less learn to read and write Standard English” (Purcell-Gates, 1995, p. 3).

Background of the Problem

Who are “those people”? In Purcell-Gates study, they were impoverished White Americans living in the rural Appalachian region. Over a decade later, in this study, “those people” are African Americans living in a large city in the southern United States. No matter who “those people” are, they are often viewed as deficient rather than different. Disparities in their learning outcomes are often attributed to this deficiency.

Education is inextricably tied to quality of life in American society. Educational attainment is linked to employment status and income, health literacy, and civic involvement. The National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) reported “in 2003, adults with higher literacy levels were more likely to be employed full-time and less likely to be out of the labor force than adults with lower literacy levels. Adults with lower literacy levels also generally earned lower incomes” (Kutner et al., 2007, p. vi). Insufficient literacy is also associated with reduced access to healthcare due to the inability to read print materials detailing available services and treatment options, failure to understand prescriptions, and an overall reduced ability to participate in one’s treatment (Hohn, 1998; Kutner, Greenberg, Jin, & Paulsen, 2006). Low literacy also compromises civic engagement. Adults with low literacy are also less likely to vote, engage in public affairs or even stay abreast of current events (Kutner et al., 2007).
There is also an inextricable link between low educational attainment and incarceration. The United States Department of Justice (2003) reported that approximately 41.3% of the total incarcerated population had an educational attainment level below high school completion. The statistics were even more dismal for African Americans: 45.1% of African American state prison inmates had educational attainment levels below high school completion.

Adults are not the only ones affected by their own educational outcomes. The learning outcomes of their children are also impacted. NCES also reported that adults with low literacy levels are less likely to read to their children and less likely to have books and other print materials in their homes (Kutner et al., 2007). They are also less likely than those with higher levels of educational attainment to talk to their children about homework, to volunteer in their children’s schools, or to attend parent-teacher conferences or other school events.

Adult Basic Education (ABE) represents an opportunity beyond the K-12 setting for adult learners, many of low socioeconomic status, to improve their basic literacy skills. Throughout the literature, “the terms adult basic education and literacy education are used interchangeably. They are both general terms that describe instruction that accomplishes the objectives of a traditional education through high school completion” (Amstutz & Sheared, 2000, p. 156). It is important to distinguish literacy in this context from its traditional definition: the ability to read and write (Merriam-Webster Dictionary, 2004). A more comprehensive definition is found in federal legislation, which defines literacy “as having an ability to read, write, speak English, compute and solve problems to achieve and function in a job and in society” (Amstutz & Sheared, 2000, p. 157).
ABE encompasses instructional levels that range from skills commonly associated with early childhood education, such as learning the alphabet, to high school completion. It is often designed to lead to attainment of a general education diploma (GED) or to increase English proficiency. ABE services are offered by a number of providers, including private nonprofit organizations, state agencies, and community colleges.

Interactions within ABE settings are subject to the same racial and cultural tensions that pervade the larger society. In order to ensure access to all potential learners in need of ABE instruction, these tensions must be navigated effectively. To this end, adult educators must consider the specific challenges ABE presents to learners from traditionally marginalized populations. The study reported here was designed to give voice to African American ABE students, members of one of these traditionally marginalized culture groups. The multiple-case study design facilitated the representation of diverse adult learners within the African American culture group. Representation of multiple voices is not intended to either produce or imply generalizability. One intention of this study was to provide entrée into discourse of the experiences of African American learners in ABE settings. The variability of gender, age, and life circumstances of the participants was intended primarily to add to the richness of that discourse.

Statement of the Problem

This study investigated reasons African Americans do not persist in ABE programs to the point where they reach their individual educational goals. Scholarly research that specifically addresses participation and persistence in ABE is scarce. Many ABE programs are nonformal, and their enrollment data is incomplete or not easily
accessible. A nonformal program is one that exists outside of traditional educational institutions, where learner participation is voluntary. The greater difficulty is in identifying potential ABE students who have never participated in any program, and those who have enrolled in multiple programs over time.

The need for ABE instruction, however, is well documented. Many American adults have literacy levels below what is necessary to fully function in society. Some estimates place the prevalence of inadequate literacy as high as one third of the U.S. adult population (Hirsch, 1988). The 2008 Digest of Education Statistics (National Center for Education Statistics, 2009) revealed that 15.8% of adults in the United States have educational attainment levels below high school completion.

Despite the prevalence of adults with educational attainment levels below high school completion, the 2001 National Household Education Survey revealed that approximately 1% of the total US adult population participated in ABE programs (Nolin, Montaquilla, Nicchitta, & Hagedorn, 2004). The few who did enroll in ABE programs were four times more likely to drop out than participants in other types of adult education programs. Anderson and Darkenwald (1979) conducted a quantitative study using a multivariate analysis of secondary data to determine predictors of persistence in adult education. They found African Americans with low socioeconomic status were the least likely of all ABE students to persist to completion of individual learning goals.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was threefold: 1) to identify the experiences that African American learners associate with the decision to leave ABE programs; 2) to ascertain the impact of participants’ perceptions of participation in ABE relative to their
self perceptions and individual learning goals; and 3) to examine the extent to which barriers perceived by participants are consistent with barriers identified in the existing literature.

Significance of the Study

Participation in ABE by those adult members of society who would benefit from it is of concern to members of all culture groups. The lack of basic literacy skills is not unique to African Americans. African Americans are however, disproportionately affected by low literacy rates and the negative effects associated with low literacy. The *Chronicle of Higher Education* (2007-2008) reported that in 2007, 14.3% of U.S. adults ages 25 and over had educational attainment levels below high school completion. The same year, 17.8% of African Americans ages 25 and over had levels of educational attainment below high school completion.

African American adults are more likely than those from many other culture groups to be in need of basic literacy instruction. ABE is, or should be, the most viable educational alternative for these learners. It is therefore necessary to examine factors that may hinder their participation and persistence.

Research Questions

This multiple-case study will examine the experiences of African American adult learners relative to their decisions to leave adult basic education programs prior to realizing their learning goals. The research will be guided by the following questions:

1. What experiences do participants associate with past decisions to leave one or more ABE programs?
2. How do participants view participation in ABE relative to their self-perceptions and individual learning goals?

3. Do participants perceive barriers other than those that have been identified in the literature?

**Definition of Terms**

*African American:* an American of African ancestry; or related to Americans of African Ancestry (American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language, 2006). Some sources quoted herein use the terms Black American; herein, the two terms are considered interchangeable.

*Adult Basic Education (ABE):* “services or instruction below the postsecondary level for individuals a) who have attained 16 years of age; b) who are not enrolled or required to be enrolled in secondary school under state law; and c) who
- i) lack sufficient mastery of basic educational skills to enable the individuals to function effectively in society;
- ii) do not have a secondary school diploma or its recognized equivalent, and have not achieved an equivalent level or education; or
- iii) are unable to speak, read, or write the English language” (United States Department of Labor, 1998).

*Barrier:* an experience or circumstance that leads to nonparticipation or decreases the “frequency or extent of participation below the desired level” necessary to achieve learning goals (Silva et al., 1998, p.74).

*Level of Educational Attainment:* refers to the highest level of formal schooling, the highest grade, one has completed (Lasater and Elliott, 2005; Silva et al., 1998).
Participation: engaging in educational activities, excluding enrollment in post-secondary education, in order to “learn basic skills or English language skills, or to enrich their lives” (Nolin et al., 2004, p. 1).

Persistence: participation to the point where educational goals have been achieved (McGivney, 2004).

Organization of the Study

Chapter 1 of this study includes a brief introduction, a statement of the problem that provides impetus for the investigation, and a description of the background of said problem. The purpose of the study and specific research questions are also presented. Relevant terms are defined as they relate to the study. The limitations inherent to the research design are also set forth.

Despite the scarcity of scholarly research that specifically addresses participation in ABE, Chapter 2 includes a general discussion of the research literature. This discussion begins with an examination of the contexts within which ABE programs exist. The term literacy and barrier are then operationalized. The remainder of the chapter explores the literature most germane to the research questions, to include discussions of the experiences learners associate with failed persistence and the relationship between participation and their self-perception.

Chapter 3 describes the research design and details the theoretical framework within which the study was situated. The methodology used in collecting and analyzing data is described. Also included is the rationale for the use of qualitative research methods in investigating the research questions.
Chapter 4 presents the general findings of the study. Findings are organized according to three types of barriers identified by Cross (1981) and are presented in narrative form to the extent that the data collected lends itself to such representations.

Chapter 5 includes a summary of the findings, a discussion of the data, and implications for further study in the field of Adult Basic Education. The research questions are addressed, and the findings discussed relative to Boshier’s Congruency Model, the literature and the pilot study.

Limitations

There were four anticipated limitations associated with the methodology employed in conducting this research:

1. No discrete means of determining participants’ socioeconomic status was identified prior to or during data collection. Data collection relative to participants’ socioeconomic status was therefore limited to employment as a potential barrier to persistence. Any additional data collected was the result of voluntary assertions made by participants. Further efforts to collect data related to socioeconomic status may have alienated participants. Researchers have found that African Americans with lower levels of formal education at times resist responding to African American researchers who have more formal education than themselves (Bailey-Johnson, 1999; Ladson-Billings, 2003). Therefore, attempts to collect data that would yield information on participants’ socioeconomic status might have compromised the collection of data more germane to the research questions.

2. The context and interview setting affected participant responses, as did the interviewees’ perceptions of the interviewer (Lieblich, Mashiac-Truval, & Zibler, 1998).
3. An assumption is made that participants have been truthful, and that their ability to verbally relate their experiences and perceptions was sufficient for data collection.

4. Findings are not generalizable to all African American adult learners, all ABE students, or any other population. The participants are regarded as singular voices. It is impossible to determine to what extent their experiences are representative.
Chapter 2

Review of the Literature

While there is abundant literature about the experiences of adult learners, little is specific to the field of adult basic education (ABE). Still less explores the experiences of learners from traditionally marginalized populations in ABE settings. This chapter begins with an attempt to conceptualize ABE through policy definitions and an examination of its underlying philosophical orientations. Competing definitions of literacy and barrier are then examined. Subsequently, there is review of the literature relevant to the first two research questions: experiences that learners associate with attrition and learner self-perception relative to participation in ABE. The chapter closes with a review of the literature that examines the nexus between these two questions.

Conceptualizing ABE

In order to examine the literature relevant to this topic, it is necessary to first situate adult basic education within the broader field of adult education. In the 1980’s, early federal initiatives to improve adult literacy were prompted by reports that young people were not equipped to face the demands of an increasingly technological workplace. (Huerta-Macias, 2002).

The federal Workforce Investment Act of 1998 defines ABE as instructional services that are provided to people over the age of 16 who are not enrolled in secondary school, and have not received a high school diploma or the equivalent (United States Department of Labor, 1998). Recent federal legislation on welfare reform has greatly increased governmental authority over ABE.
ABE programs that receive federal funding must adhere to stringent mandates. Among these is the requirement that learners take standardized tests and demonstrate improvement in predetermined literacy skills. The primary goal of ABE programs that receive funding through the Workforce Investment Act is to prepare learners for sustained employment (United States Department of Labor, 1998).

Philosophical Underpinnings of ABE

*Behaviorism*

Current ABE programs—through an emphasis on the acquisition of predetermined skills, standardized testing, and learning as a means to secure employment—largely subscribe to a behaviorist philosophy of education. The emphasis is on identifying a set of necessary skills, “teaching those skills, and requiring a certain standard of performance in those skills. Education in this arena of practice is concerned with the outcomes rather than the process of learning” (Elias & Merriam, 2005, p. 99). Behaviorist models subscribe to clearly defined roles for teacher and learner, accountability for producing measurable outcomes, and the objective of bringing about desired behaviors in students (Rachal, 1993; Sparks & Peterson, 2000). Behaviorist philosopher B.F. Skinner (1974) maintained that a society is strengthened by educating as many of its members as possible.

It bears mention, however, that there are a number of shortcomings inherent to behaviorism. Critics of behaviorist approaches claim that an emphasis on measureable learning outcomes actually hinders learning. They argue that the need to demonstrate learning on a standardized test or by performing specific job-related tasks minimizes the learning itself. Adult students have little input into instruction. The result is low student
satisfaction and only minimal acquisition of skills. “ABE has become a system designed
to meet the economic imperatives where a premium is put on technical knowledge that, in
the end, deskills learners and practitioners” (Sparks & Peterson, 2000, p. 265). Huerta-
Macias (2002) identifies problems with retention in adult education programs as a
potential result of limitations imposed by a behaviorist philosophical orientation.

Definitions of Literacy

Similarly, there are competing definitions of what it means to be literate. What
skills and knowledge are necessary to function effectively within American society?
Hirsh (1988) promotes cultural literacy and defines it as possession of “the network of
information that all competent readers possess” (p. 2). Furthermore, he attributes low
levels of literacy among a large portion of the adult population within the United States to
“the documented decline in shared knowledge” (p. 10). Hirsch asserts the need for a new
way of viewing literacy.

We Americans have long accepted literacy as a paramount aim of schooling, but
only recently have some of us who have done research in the field begun to
realize that literacy is far more than a skill and that it requires large amounts of
specific information. (p. 2)

This type of cultural literacy sets forth the specific competencies and content that learners
must master in order to function in society (Amstutz & Sheared, 2000).

Opponents claim that this definition of cultural literacy promotes a monocultural
approach to literacy instruction that requires learners to embrace the linguistic code of the
elite as a means to improve their own life circumstances (Amstutz & Sheared, 2000),
reinforcing the status quo rather than promoting social change. They advocate a form of cultural literacy that is more pluralistic in nature.

Pluralistic definitions of literacy advocate a specific content that exemplifies the diversity within the U.S. culture. The movement toward cooperative learning that emphasizes teamwork and collaboration is part of the multicultural definition of what it means to be literate. The content of pluralistic literacy challenges the monocultural beliefs and practices of educational institutions. (Amstutz & Sheared, 2000, p. 157)

Amstutz and Sheared (2000) termed this multicultural conceptualization critical literacy, literacy that promotes critical thinking. They exclaim that literacy is not neutral, rather it is impacted by gender, race, and socioeconomic status. Critical adult literacy instruction purports to empower learners to effect change in their lives and the lives of others by equipping them to critically evaluate both their life circumstances and varied means of addressing those circumstances. Literacy is regarded as a means for social change.

This debate over the meaning of literacy most appropriate to meet the needs of adult learners is rooted in the dispute over the purposes of education that pervades discourse in K-12 educational settings. Sadker and Sadker (2005) suggest the two primary goals of American schools are contradictory. It is impossible “to transmit society’s knowledge and values” (p. 132) and “to restructure society” (p. 133) at the same time. Hirsch clearly aligns with the former goal, while his detractors align with the latter. Here these differences are highlighted to provide a framework for this literature review, to underscore the incongruity that abides in the scant literature around ABE, and to further the reader’s understanding of the literature discussed.
What Constitutes a Barrier?

To the same end, it is also prudent to operationalize the term *barrier* and to examine the ongoing inconsistency of its use in the literature. A working paper compiled by the National Center for Educational Statistics asserts that studies on ABE assign two meanings to this term. “One common view is that barriers are things that could not be overcome, or else the nonparticipants would have participated” (Silva et al., 1998, p. 74). This meaning is based on the assumption that nonparticipants want to participate, but experience a “blocking constraint” (p. 74). A second meaning identifies barriers as “things that depress the frequency or extent of participation below the desired level, but do not necessarily prohibit participation entirely” (Silva et al., 1998, p. 74). Such a barrier is referred to as an “inhibiting constraint.”

There is no distinction made as to barriers that can be overcome and those that cannot. Such a distinction would only be meaningful in the context of individual lived experiences over an indeterminate period of time. A barrier that is deemed surmountable for one learner may, due to current circumstances or perceptions, be deemed insurmountable for another. A discussion of the varying definitions of barrier is useful to the extent that it may inform the reader’s engagement with the literature. It is also worth noting that not all researchers have explicitly delineated either of these definitions when discussing barriers encountered by adult learners (Flowers, 2000; Merriam & Caffarella, 1999; Peterson, 1996; Sparks, 1998).

The failure to consistently distinguish between the two types of barriers – barriers to participation versus barriers to persistence— may be due to the limited availability of data on enrollment in nonformal ABE programs. There is also the difficulty inherent to
identifying potential ABE students who have never entered a program, and those who enter multiple programs over time. In light of these considerations, barriers to participation have been distinguished from barriers to persistence only when those distinctions are unambiguous.

Types of Barriers

The literature reveals a number of factors contributing to nonparticipation and low retention rates in ABE programs. Commonly cited factors include both internal and external barriers experienced by participants. Cross (1981) delineated these barriers into three types: situational, dispositional, and structural.

Situational barriers are external to the potential learner and include life circumstances that affect decisions about participation (Cross, 1981; Johnstone and Riveria, 1965). Examples of situational barriers identified in the literature included cost, lack of family support, and scheduling conflicts (Johnstone and Riveria, 1965; Peterson, 1996).

Dispositional barriers are internal to the potential learner and include attitudes toward education and perceptions about oneself as a learner (Cross, 1981). Attrition, or failure to persist, is often the result of unmet learner expectations. These expectations may be related to slow progress, past educational experiences, or failure to realize a connection between educational growth and social mobility (Boshier, 1973; Kerka, 1995).

Within the literature, there is substantial consideration of the predispositions and life circumstances that intersect to impact participation decisions.
This notion of individual choice fails to consider the structural factors that press upon people as they attempt to meet their educational needs. We know that by focusing on the failings of individuals rather than social structures, maintenance of the status quo is ensured. (Sparks, 1998, p. 246)

Structural barriers are those created by circumstances within the ABE setting. For instance, findings made by Kerka (1995) indicated that failure to meet learner expectations is often the direct result of participants receiving misleading or inadequate information upon enrollment in adult learning programs. Inflexibility of class schedules, learner groupings that are excessively heterogeneous, and a lack of appropriate instructional materials are also identified as structural barriers to retention (Shod, 1995).

Experiences Learners Associate with Attrition

Noddings (1992) advocated an ethic of care within educational settings. Such an ethic is characterized by mutual respect and interconnectedness, whereby each actor within the learning environment is motivated to maximize their potential. Gilligan (1982) expanded Noddings’ argument by explicitly juxtaposing care perspective with justice perspective. According to Gilligan, an educator who employs a care perspective considers it equitable to address the varying individual needs of diverse learners. Conversely, an educator who employs a justice perspective considers it equitable to treat every learner the same, without regard to individual differences such as cultural identity and socioeconomic status.

Learners perceive educational settings in which cultural identity is ignored as disrespectful and potentially racist (Sparks, 1998). Ogbu (1983) identified perceived racism as a dispositional barrier to persistence for many African American adult learners.
[T]he clear connection between educational achievement and adult economic participation serves to encourage whites to persevere and achieve in school. African Americans, however, have been faced with a reality where educational attainment does not necessarily bring the benefits that it brings to whites. This serves to discourage them from committing to, and persisting in, the schooling process. (Ogbu, 1983, p. 139)

Peterson (1996) went on to explain that the perception of educational attainment as ineffectual has often been reinforced by learners’ past experiences. Unsatisfying relationships with instructors and peers have also been found to contribute to attrition (Kerka, 1995; Quigley, 1995). The subsequent section of this review examines the effect of these relationships—coupled with program discourse—on the marginalization of ABE students from traditionally marginalized groups.

**Marginalization**

In a study of Hispanic adults who qualified for ABE instruction but elected not to enroll, Sparks (1998) challenged tenets set forth in earlier studies of participation in ABE. In “The Politics of Culture and the Struggle to Get an Education” Sparks questioned three mistaken attributions commonly assigned to adult learners’ nonparticipation: ideologies that separate the pedagogical underpinnings of ABE from society’s problems; the belief that “once barriers such as time, cost and location are removed, people will engage in traditional programs” (p. 245); and the assumption that, once these barriers are removed, nonparticipation can be attributed to laziness or other deficits on the part of the learner.

In an effort to deconstruct these ideologies, Sparks (1998) brought to bear the theme of marginalization and its impact on the participation decisions of some learners in
ABE programs. In describing learners’ experiences of perceived marginalization, Sparks relates learners’ tales of exclusion, and a sense of being invisible to both instructors and fellow students. Learners reported a lack of support or acknowledgement that left them feeling isolated.

Reports of “prejudice and discrimination at personal and group levels indicate people’s awareness of their role and value, or lack thereof in the larger community” (Sparks, 1998, p. 251). While Sparks’ findings may not be generalizable to all ABE settings, they speak to the multiple levels of marginalization to which learners may be subjected within the learning environment.

Within the theme of marginalization, Sparks (1998) identified three subthemes. The first of Sparks’ subthemes is exclusion. “Some individuals painted pictures of exclusion and conveyed this sense by such phrases as ‘pushed away’, ‘didn’t care’, ‘walked away’, and ‘figure it out’” (p. 252). The experiences described by participants in Sparks’s study contradict Keddie’s (1980) assertion that “the ideology of adult education achieves for practitioners a promise that their primary concern will be students’ needs and interests” (p. 46). Another of Sparks subthemes was invisibility. Learners in her study related experiences of being ignored in the learning setting.

Sparks (1998) final subtheme was inferiority, to which she attributed “a sense of anger and justified indignation” (p. 253). She described learners’ “past experiences of humiliation and remembered pain” (p. 253) that result from experiences with discrimination in the learning environment. Participants described a lack of motivation that stems from not wanting to engage in a discriminatory learning environment.
A second theme that emerged in Sparks (1998) study is a lack of intercultural understanding. Participants described learning experiences where “their sense of difference was questioned rather than valued” (p. 255). This questioning extended to the use of learner’s native language in the classroom. Hispanic learners taking part in the study recounted instances of being ridiculed or admonished for the use of their native language in the classroom. Similarly, they expressed feelings of frustration at being placed in learning settings where there was no evidence of their cultural history within the curricula. Sparks posited these interpretations as justified. “One man’s indignation reveals the strength of his convictions and the importance of his culture” (p. 255). The indignation to which Sparks was referring played out in participants’ contentions that they were more comfortable in learning environments where there were many Hispanic learners, and where not all teachers were of the majority culture. Sparks equated learning environments that lack intercultural understanding with efforts to exercise social control over learners from traditionally marginalized culture groups.

While ABE espouses opportunities for learning, it limits access to what people can learn, sets variable conditions under which learning occurs, and has standardized and institutionalized mechanisms for social control and hegemonic purposes. Teachers as agents promote the status quo. (p. 256)

Sparks (1998) emerged with a theory of educational discrimination that pervades adult education settings due to “conditions of structural, cultural, and historical differentials and coalesced in the context of educational struggles” (p. 256).

In a study that questioned the purpose of adult education programs for recipients of public assistance, Cervero and Sandlin (2003) tied together the structural barriers
discussed earlier with “racial power dynamics” (p. 262). This study examined teacher interaction with students in two classrooms within an adult education program for welfare recipients. The authors contended “the overwhelming message in both classrooms supported teachers’ and programmes’ perception of students as dependent and deficit-ridden” (Cervero & Sandlin, 2003, p. 257).

Within these classes, researchers found an undue emphasis on controlling student behavior.

The emphasis in both classrooms on rules, control and proper behaviour enforces the stereotypes held by both programmes and teachers about welfare recipients needing to be managed properly. While students often resisted this control, this resistance served in the end to further reinforce these negative stereotypes and caused teachers to control their learning and behavior even more tightly. (Cervero and Sandlin, 2003, p. 257)

The researchers described student resistance as both passive and active. Passive strategies included daydreaming and refusal to engage with classroom instruction. Active strategies employed by learners in the study included carrying on conversations that were not a part of classroom discussion.

Wax and Wax (1971) discussed similar methods of learner resistance in “Great Tradition, Little Tradition, and Formal Education.” Like Cervero and Sandlin (2003), they attribute this resistance to learners’ awareness that their cultural norms were being ignored by instructors. Wax and Wax (1971) describe educational settings in which instructors were of the dominant culture group and students of a homogenous minority culture group. Within this setting, instructors regarded the students’ culture as inferior,
the little tradition. They endeavored, through their instruction, to replace this little tradition with the great tradition, or the culture of the majority group. In response, learners became increasingly cohesive in their overt rejection of the instructors and indifference to the educational setting. Some learners rejected domination by simply withdrawing, refusing to engage with instruction. Others refused to participate in class assignments that called on them to work individually, holding fast to their cultural norm of collectivism. Still others dropped out. Flight is identified as a common reaction of learners in response to the efforts of educators to replace or ignore the learners’ cultural norms within the educational setting.

The Role of Family

Similar to the learners described above, Hill (1999) identified “strong kinship bonds” as one of the strengths of African American families. Hill also acknowledged that the role of family member and friend are not always distinguishable among African Americans. The impact of family relationships on the persistence of ABE students is a proverbial double edged sword. Family support, or the lack thereof, impacts a learner’s disposition. Learners’ roles within their families can also contribute to situational barriers.

In a report commissioned by the National Center for the Study of Adult Learning and Literacy (NCSALL), Comings, Parrella, and Soricone (1999), acknowledged social persuasion as a key factor in adult learner persistence. Social persuasion refers to verbal encouragement by other adults, to include family members, friends, ABE program staff and instructors. Relationships were identified as a positive support by participants, more often than any other positive support. “Among the supportive relationships noted by
respondents, the most frequent was family support, identified by 78.9% (75) of the 95 respondents who noted relational supports.” Study findings indicated that teen and adult children may be especially significant supporters. Bandura (1986) suggests that family members who have participated in adult education programs can play a significant role in encouraging the participation and persistence of others.

Just as encouragement by friends and family members can have a positive impact, discouragement can impact learners negatively. Disapproval by friends and family has been cited as a barrier to participation and persistence (Hayes, 1988). Another way in which friends and family members play a negative role in the participation decisions of adult learners is by allowing them to rely on their literacy skills, reading and calculating for them. This removes or lessens the need for the adult with low literacy to develop skills of their own, creating a dispositional barrier to participation (Fingeret, 1983).

Self-Perception and Participation

Low-self esteem was also identified in the literature as a dispositional barrier to retention for many adult learners. Hall and Donaldson (1997) described the influence of self-esteem on female adult learners who have yet to complete high school. “The way a woman feels about herself, her self-esteem and self-confidence, and the way she can express herself are significant elements in her decision about whether to participate in adult education” (p. 98). Leong (1995) pointed out that low self-esteem may disproportionally impact learners from traditionally marginalized populations. In a study of the career development of minority workers, Leong (1995) identified ethnic identity as a predictor of how members of a culture group view their intellectual abilities.
Boshier’s Congruence Model explicitly dissects the nexus between learner self-perception and the learning environment. Boshier (1973) proposed that adult learner participation is the result of interaction between psychological and structural factors. According to Boshier, persistence is contingent upon congruence between the two. He found that failure to persist “was the function of the cumulative effect of self/other incongruence which initially resides within the participant” (p. 274). According to Boshier, deficiency motivated learners are driven primarily by external environmental factors, while growth motivated learners are driven by self-concept and internally-held attitudes. Boshier maintains that learners who exhibit deficiency motivation and perceive incongruence between themselves and the learning environment are likely to perceive mediating variables as barriers, while learners who perceive congruence will choose to persist.

The Convergence of Learners’ Experiences and Self-Perceptions

Self-perception is not a stagnant construct. It is impacted by our experiences across the lifespan. Prior studies involving learners in adult education settings have highlighted the connection between the ways that learners see themselves and the decisions they make about participation.

Themes of cultural identity and language as deterrents to persistence were evident in a study conducted by Sealy-Ruiz (2007). In “Wrapping the Curriculum Around Their Lives: Using a Culturally Relevant Curriculum with African American Adult Women”, Sealy-Ruiz identified cultural identity and language as barriers experienced by African American adult learners. Like Sparks (1998), Sealy-Ruiz deconstructed the
characterization of African American learners who elected not to participate in adult education as “lazy, lacking ambition, and unsuccessful” (p. 56).

Research on culturally relevant adult education with African American students suggested that learners are able to validate self and group identity and use their cultural knowledge to facilitate transformational learning experiences (Sealy-Ruiz, 2007). Sealy Ruiz rationalized cultural relevance in the assertion that “a curriculum that speaks to their personal experiences and ways of knowing can be a bridge to connect what they want and need to learn” (p. 44). Her study identified themes very similar to those identified by Sparks (1998): “language validation, the fostering of positive self and group identity, and positive self-affirmation or affirmation of goals” (p. 44).

Sealy-Ruiz (2007) illustrated that validating learners’ use of language positively impacts self-esteem and motivation. In her discussion of African American Vernacular English, or Black English, Sealy-Ruiz identified this dialect as the native language of learners in the study. She recalled that learners viewed Black English as inferior to the English spoken by the majority culture. Even after being exposed to linguist’s validations of Black English as a language with a “rich history and formal grammatical structure” (p. 53), learners participating in the study were hesitant to regard it as anything other than a barrier to learning. Sealy-Ruiz (2007) rejected the notion that speaking Black English is a barrier to student success. Rather, she maintains that its rejection within the educational setting contributes to student’s learning problems.

Sealy-Ruiz’s findings are an extension of those made by Sparks. Whereas Sparks (1998) identified the elements of marginalization, Sealy-Ruiz (2007) advocated a response on the part of adult learners. She highlighted the need of African American
learners to “problematize” marginalization and “take the opportunity to alter and control the images that are presented of them” (p. 54) within the literature. Sealy-Ruiz (2007) suggested that this can be accomplished by infusing the experiences of African American learners into the curriculum.

Educators can start by assigning readings and coursework that are relevant to the students’ lives. Students must be given the opportunity to discuss aspects of their culture and be encouraged to bring in cultural artifacts and work by writers from their backgrounds. The readings students share with the class should be given equal attention as the readings assigned by the classroom instructor. (p. 58)

By doing this, students are empowered to counteract negative representations of their culture groups by highlighting historical contributions and more commendable facets of those cultures (Sealy-Ruiz, 2007). Educators can facilitate this empowerment by creating curricula that are student-centered. Findings in this study not only extolled the potential of culturally relevant curricula to impact the learning outcomes and motivation of adult students from traditionally marginalized populations. They also underscored the potential negative outcomes of adult education that seeks to ignore or minimize the cultural identity of the learner. Among these potential negative outcomes are high rates of attrition and nonparticipation (Peterson, 1996; Sealy-Ruiz, 2007; Sparks, 1998).

The theme of language as a barrier to African American adult learner participation emerged repeatedly in the literature (Flowers, 2000; Sealy-Ruiz, 2007; Sparks, 1998). In a study entitled “Codeswitching and Ebonics in Urban Adult Basic Education Classrooms,” Flowers (2000) considered the role of language as more than a confounding factor in adult students’ participation decisions.
Even with the recent uproar over Black English, the ebonics debate managed to divert attention away from the real critical issue of language as it relates to literacy learning. In the meantime, adults are failing to improve their literacy abilities and are increasingly dropping out of adult basic education and General Educational Development (GED) programs. (Flowers, 2000, p. 221)

Researchers implied that the impact of language on participation decisions begins with a potential participant’s initial perception of the mission and goals of an adult learning program. “Whether African Americans learn about the program’s intent through verbal or written modalities, they will or will not participate based on their understanding of the program’s mission and purpose” (Flowers, 2000, p. 235). This understanding may depend on the means of communication as much as it depends on the actual content of the message.

African Americans have used and continue to use the oral tradition and figurative language as a means of survival in the face of adverse sociopolitical practices such as slavery and economic oppression. Today, some African Americans continue to value conveyance of the message verbally to a greater extent than through the written word. Based on the established literacy standards and practices in the United States, however, it appears that verbal literacy is not highly valued as is the ability to read and write. Consequently, this divergence of thinking on the relative importance of learning and using certain literacy types will restrict some individuals’ life chances academically, occupationally, and politically. (Harris, Khami, & Pollock, p.10)
Thus, language was identified as a barrier to participation for learners whose primary dialect is not aligned with the language used to communicate the goals of a program. Providers’ failure to communicate the mission orally may also be a deterrent to participation for African American learners.

For others, language becomes a barrier to persistence in ABE programs. Flowers (2000) discussed the African American learner as often bilingual, having some level of proficiency in Standard English and an often higher level of proficiency in Black English. While such a learner recognizes the use of Standard English as dominant, Flowers found that language is used as a “ploy for solidarity” (p. 236) among speakers of Black English. Language becomes a cohesive tie to cultural identity. When a learner is forced to use Standard English, or switch codes, in the learning environment, this code switching accentuates differences between learners and instructors from other culture groups. Therefore, while language can bind African American adult learners, it can also serve to separate them from instructors.

Similar to Sparks (1998) and Sealy-Ruiz (2007), Flowers (2000) pointed out that classroom interactions can also lead to alienation by contributing to African American adult students’ negative perceptions of their language and its acceptability.

Rather than acknowledge the polyrhythmic realities of the learner and the positive impact this has on the way people read and interpret knowledge, adult basic educators often spend time correcting language structures and forms that reflect and allow for communalism and sharing. (p. 235)

*Polyrhythmic realities* refers to the blend of realities, to include the norms of their native dialect, experiences by learners that make up the totality of their existence. Among these
realities are the norms of their native dialect. Flowers (2000) likened these intermingled realities to the “harmony, tones, and notes” that intersect in music (p. 233).

Flowers (2000) made two recommendations to ABE instructors with regard to the use of Black English in the adult educating setting. The first recommendation was that these educators “acknowledge the importance and power of using a language that encourages participation” (p. 235). This recommendation must be approached with caution because it is somewhat ambiguous. It is unclear whether Flowers is suggesting that instructors speak in Black English, or that they simply honor and accept its use by learners. One must question whether its use may be perceived by learners as disingenuous, or perhaps even offensive. The second recommendation was that educators acknowledge the merits of Black dialect as a means to cohesion among learners. The positive peer relationships that could result from this cohesion are believed to encourage participation (Kerka, 1995).

In Cervero and Sandlin’s (2003) study, learner resistance resulted in the learners being disciplined by teachers. The researchers argue that such efforts to control learners are the result of “stereotypes held by programmes and teachers about welfare recipients” (p. 262). Welfare, or public assistance, is monetary aid provided to those in need (Merriam-Webster Dictionary, 2004). It is awarded to those of the lowest socioeconomic status. Therefore, one might argue that the stereotypes in question may be applied to persons of low socioeconomic status and members of other groups viewed as inferior.

While the study did not explicitly explore stereotypes assigned on the basis of race, Cervero and Sandlin (2003) found that there was a tendency to ignore race in the educational setting. “When they talked about race with their students, they always took
the opportunity to explain to students that race was not a factor” (p. 261). The students resisted this omission. The researchers recounted stories of students relating their learning experience to slavery. In response, rather than acknowledge that students were “raising astute critiques of the racial power dynamics” (p. 262) within the educational setting, students were admonished and their assertions minimized.

When students raised issues of race, teachers often responded with stories from their past through which they illustrated that race was not an issue to be dealt with. A second type of response was to shut the discussion down altogether and to tell students not to talk about such issues. (Cervero & Sandlin, 2003, p. 262)

This provides an example of learner responses to an educational setting that ignores their cultural identity.

The experiences of learners in a welfare to work program may be perceived as irrelevant to a discussion of African American learner persistence. In these programs, learners are compelled to participate or risk loss of their public assistance benefits (Flowers, 2000). There can therefore be no meaningful discussion of participation decisions made by learners. This study is useful, however, in illuminating the negative perceptions of these learners by their ABE instructors, and the ways in which these perceptions inform instructional practices. The role of ABE instructors in learners’ participation decisions emerged consistently throughout the literature.

Summary

Adult basic education (ABE) is designed to meet the needs of learners over the age of 16 who have not completed high school. In recent years there has been a great deal of debate over what should be taught in these programs. Many programs have
shifted to an emphasis on a predetermined set of skills, dictated by federal initiatives aimed at producing a more educated workforce.

The literature cites a number of situational and dispositional barriers to participation and persistence by adult learners in ABE. These are the result of learners’ life circumstances, attitudes about participation, or perceptions of their ability to be successful in an adult learning program. On the other hand, structural barriers are beyond the control of learners. These relate to program design, curriculum, and instruction (Cross, 1981).

The literature revealed that learners from traditionally marginalized populations experience structural barriers that may not affect learners from the majority culture. Lack of cultural relevance and intercultural understanding appear to result in learning environments that alienate adult learners from these marginalized cultures. This alienation may be the result of program discourse, curricula, instructional strategies, or any combination of these factors (Amstutz & Sheared, 2000; Cervero & Sandlin, 2003; Sealy-Ruiz, 2007; Sparks, 1998). It is often the result of interactions with instructors in ABE programs. Boshier’s Congruence Model underscores the importance of learner perceptions of structural factors within the ABE setting.

Differences in the ways that learners and instructors used language was found to create dissention within ABE settings. The literature suggests that language barriers do not only affect learners who speak English, or are learning English, as a second language. Language also impacts African American adult learners’ perceptions of themselves, one another, and instructors (Flowers, 2000; Harris, 2000; Huerta-Macias, 2002; Sealy-Ruiz,
2007. The rejection of the Black English dialect within the ABE setting was found to negatively impact self-esteem, motivation, and engagement with instructional materials.

Similarly, the literature suggests a causal link between African American adult learner participation and culturally relevant curricula. Sealy-Ruiz (2007), Sparks (1998), and Flowers (2000) suggested that ABE classes must appeal to the cultural identity of learners in order to keep those learners engaged. Cervero and Sandlin (2003) revealed that learners adopt strategies for resistance when their cultural identity is ignored in the learning environment.

Despite the scarcity of scholarly research on ABE, the literature in this review provides insight into two areas of concern to ABE practitioners and program planners: barriers to participation experienced by adult learners and the experiences of learners from traditionally marginalized populations in ABE settings.
Chapter 3

Methodology

This chapter describes the methodology used in conducting this qualitative multiple-case study. It begins with a description of the qualitative research design that was used to collect and interpret data, followed by a description of the theoretical framework that underlies that design. The subsequent section describes the participants who took part in the study, including the criteria guiding their selection. The setting in which data was collected is described as well. Data collection and data analysis methods are then set forth. Ending the chapter is a discussion of the subjectivities that potentially impacted the study, and the researcher’s efforts to affect reciprocity.

Research Design

“Qualitative researchers are interested in understanding the meanings people have constructed, that is, how they make sense of their world and the experiences they have in the world” (Merriam, 1998, p. 6). Denzin and Lincoln (2005) described the practices undertaken by qualitative researchers to illuminate the worlds of participants for those to whom these worlds might not be visible otherwise:

These practices transform the world. They turn the world into a series of representations, including field notes, interviews, conversations, photographs, recordings and memos to the self. At this level, qualitative research involves an interpretive, natural approach to the world. This means that qualitative researchers study things in their natural settings, attempting to make sense of, or interpret, phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them. (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005, p. 3)
One intended outcome of this study is to craft genuine representations of the lived experiences of participants and the meanings they assigned these experiences, in order to make visible the factors that contribute to their decisions about participation in ABE programs.

The interpretivist nature of the study design and data collection methods to be described in this chapter allowed the researcher to garner substantive understanding of the participants’ perceptions through authentic interaction. “Being open to any possibility can lead to serendipitous discoveries” (Merriam, 1998, p. 121). Stake (1995) asserted that qualitative researchers must attempt “to remain open to the nuances of increasing complexity” (p. 21). In qualitative research, as categories and themes are identified, “organizing concepts change somewhat as the study moves along” (Stake, 1995, p. 133). The “nuances” that have impacted this study are the product of the participant’s communications. This exemplifies the capability of qualitative research to empower participants to play a role in shaping the direction of the study.

Merriam and Caffarella (1999) underscored the potential of qualitative research to give voice to the experiences of people from traditionally marginalized populations. [W]e must continue to be vigilant as researchers in choosing groups to study that represent a wide spectrum of learners. This includes purposely including people of color, of different socioeconomic classes, and of different cultural backgrounds as study participants. (p. 314)

The overarching intent of this study was to begin to provide a representative voice for African American learners in need of ABE instruction.
Theoretical Framework

Methods employed in this study reflect an interpretivist theoretical framework. Interpretivism “looks for culturally derived and historically situated interpretations of the social-life world” (Crotty, 2005, p. 67). The key concepts underlying interpretivism are culture, historical context, and interpretation. Within interpretivism, the subjectivity of individually derived meaning is valued. An individual’s interpretation is accepted as a truth. Further, culture is recognized as the backdrop of individual meaning (Crotty, 2005). Interpretivism recognizes that common understandings within a culture are likely to color the ways in which individuals make meaning of their experiences.

The proposed research was conducted with the assumption that participants voluntarily chose to leave one or more ABE programs based on meanings that they assigned the programs, interactions within the learning environments, and their participation in ABE. These meanings are individually constructed, and the subjective nature of these meanings does not compromise their validity. Meanings that participants have assigned to interactions with other learners, instructors, and program administrators were all deemed germane to the study. As anticipated, participants cited interactions separate from the learning environment in their exploration of barriers to persistence.

Use of the interpretivist theoretical framework allowed me to explore participants’ perceptions of their lived experiences while acknowledging “culture as the meaningful matrix that guides our lives” (Crotty, 2005, p. 71). Stated simply, interpretivism enabled me to examine meanings that the participants constructed related to their roles as learners in the ABE setting that are the function of understandings within their culture. Were there aspects of their experience that have been interpreted negatively because they are
African American? Were there experiences with instructors or others in the learning environment that were perceived negatively due to cultural difference? Are there understandings implicit to our culture that serve as barriers to persistence, or that led them to perceive barriers—situational, dispositional, or structural—that may not be perceived by learners with different cultural understandings?

Situating this study within the interpretivist theoretical framework enabled me to examine the participants’ perceptions of themselves as learners, as well as perceptions of the learning environments where they participated, within their cultural context. Merriam and Caffarella (1999) stressed the role of such research in addressing barriers to participation in adult education. “We also suggest that research that takes into account the sociocultural and political context of adult learning might well advance our understanding of the problems of access and opportunity that continue to trouble the field” (p. 404). The research proposal detailing this study stipulated that political contexts would be considered within this study only to the extent that participants introduced them. No such introduction was made by any participant. Sociocultural contexts, however, were inherent to the proposed methodology to be employed.

Design of the Study

The study employed qualitative case study methods as defined by Merriam (1988, 1998). “One selects a case study approach because of an interest in understanding the phenomenon in a holistic manner” (1988, p. 153). Yin (2003) set forth more specific precepts for case study research. It is inquiry that:
1) investigates a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context, especially when the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly evident; [and]

2) copes with the technically distinctive situation in which there will be more variables of interest than data points; with data needing to converge in a triangulating fashion; and as another result, benefits from the prior development of theoretical propositions to guide data collection and analysis. (pp. 13-14)

This is a multiple-case study, also referred to as a collective case study. “In education, the case can be defined in a number of ways” to include “a group of people” (Merriam, 1988, p. 153). The multiple-case design is appropriate for investigating “an instance of a class of phenomena” (p. 153). The case, or instance, investigated here was that of six African American learners who were enrolled in the ABE program at City Literacy Center (CLC) at the time of data collection. Each failed to persist in one or more previous programs. Some were previously enrolled at CLC, while others have been previously enrolled in programs offered by other local organizations. This multiple-case was bound by many contexts, the most prevalent of which is the past failure to persist in this or some other ABE program. Additional contexts include culture, location, and socioeconomic status. The study was situated within these interrelated contexts.

This study can also be characterized as an instrumental case study. An instrumental case study is borne of the researcher’s interest in a problem. The case is selected and the study designed with the intention of providing insight into that problem (Stake, 1995). The participants and study design were selected based on my interest in
the problem of inconsistent participation in ABE, rather than the extent to which potential participants’ experiences can be generalized to the population of adult learners or any subset of that population. One desired outcome of this study was to “establish empathetic understanding for the reader, through description” (Stake, 1995, p. 39) of their lived experiences. This desired outcome is characteristic of qualitative case studies (Merriam, 1988, 1998; Stake, 1995; Yin, 2003).

Rationale for the Study Design

There is no formula for determining the number of cases to include in a multiple case study (Merriam, 1988; Yin, 2003). The number of participants to be represented in the proposed study was determined pursuant to many factors. The first of these is Creswell’s claim that multiple-case studies potentially compromise the researcher’s ability to provide depth in the analysis of any one case. The more participants, the less depth, is his assertion (Creswell, 1998). In contrast to this view is the need to represent multiple voices. “Balance and variety are important; opportunity to learn is of primary importance” (Stake, 1995, p. 7). Six is a moderate number of participants. A smaller number may not have allowed for variety within the data, while a larger number may have compromised the extent to which I could represent participants’ lived experiences. There was also significant consideration lended the probability that data collection would be impacted by the very transience among potential participants that gives this study its purpose. This transience limits ongoing access to potential participants, which supports the inclusion of a moderate number.

It is my belief that the breadth of insights that can result from the multiple-case design are of great consequence. The very problem under investigation speaks to the
transient nature of the population being studied, and underscores the need to explore barriers to sustained participation from multiple and varied perspectives. I concede that in-depth analysis of individual cases is a desirable undertaking for further investigation of this phenomenon.

Given the design of this study—particularly the selection of only African American participants—a potential criticism may be that an ethnographic study would have been more appropriate. The proposed study, however, is less concerned with defining the shared culture of participants than with exploring the experiences and perceptions associated with their participation in ABE. The problem under investigation is not unique to this culture group. The proposed study, therefore, is concerned with the extent to which cultural understandings impact participation decisions, but does not presume that all barriers to persistence will be attributable to African American cultural norms.

Setting

At the time of data collection the participants were currently enrolled in an ABE program offered by a local nonprofit organization that has been in existence since the mid 1970s. This organization offers adult learning and family literacy programs at no cost to students. Instruction is delivered by volunteer tutors. Delivery models include one-to-one tutoring, small classes, and software-based instruction. A Program Manager matches students with individual tutors and/ or places them in classes according to the student’s needs and availability. The term tutor is used herein to describe all instructional volunteers, as this reflects the language used in the research setting. The organization,
herein referred to as the City Literacy Center (CLC), is independent and does not receive federal funding.

The CLC is located in a large city in the region of the United States known as the Midsouth. The city, founded in 1819, is situated along a major U.S. waterway. This location, coupled with rich soil, established the city as a center of trade and commerce prior to the Civil War. Cotton, and therefore slavery, was the cornerstone of the city’s economy. The city became a Union stronghold during the Civil War, attracting many former slaves and increasing the African American population by 400% between 1860 and 1870.

Since this time, the city has had a history wrought with racial tension. Deadly race riots erupted in 1866, leaving 46 dead, hundreds wounded and many freedmen’s schools and churches destroyed. A hundred years later, riots erupted once again following the assassination of a national civil rights leader. The years between saw some gains for African Americans in the arts, politics, and business. Still many were plagued by poverty, and Jim Crow laws limited their opportunities for socioeconomic growth (www.cityofmidsouth.org/framework).

Today, 61.4% of this city’s population is African American and 20.6% of city residents live in poverty (http://quickfacts.census.gov/qfd/states/47/4748000.html).

A recent report indicated that 24.4% of African Americans in the state where CLC is located have educational attainment levels below high school completion (National Center for Education Statistics, 2009). This state ranked 12th among the United States and its territories in the number of adults eligible for federally funded ABE services (Lasater & Elliott, 2005).
Participant Selection

Purposeful sampling was used to select participants for this study. Purposeful sampling allows the researcher to designate the criteria by which participants are identified according to the research questions and the purpose of the research (Merriam, 1998). I identified five criteria as being germane to the research questions: 1) African American cultural identity, 2) 21 years of age or older, 3) prior participation in at least one voluntary adult basic education program, 4) having not completed said program, and 5) having since returned to an ABE program. Adult learners who were compelled to participate as a condition of receiving public assistance, or as result of involvement with criminal courts, were excluded. Similarly, those under age 21 and those who left a program due to completion or promotion to a higher level program, such as leaving an ABE program to enter GED instruction were excluded.

Accessing Potential Participants

I met with the executive director and the program manager of CLC and described the study and participation criteria. Both agreed to allow me access to the organization’s students and facility. Furthermore, the program manager agreed to facilitate my connecting to potential participants. She identified a list of students who were known to have been enrolled before, and introduced me to potential participants.

Due to their varying levels of comfort with print materials, the pre-qualifying questionnaire (Appendix A) and informed consent (Appendix B) were presented to learners both orally and in writing. The language used in these documents is intentionally informal, as not to intimidate potential participants. Responses to the questionnaire and informed consent were recorded and transcribed.


**Participant Profiles**

Carol is in her forties and has two adult sons, one of whom still lives at home with her and her husband. Carol completed high school, but did not earn a regular diploma. Over the course of approximately four years, Carol attended three ABE programs. She earned her high school diploma in May of 2010, after the start of data collection for this study. At that time, she had been enrolled at CLC for approximately four months. This was her second time enrolling in this ABE setting.

Vincent is an ordained minister in his mid seventies. He has "raised 10 kids" ranging in age from their mid fifties to a teenager who still lives in his home. He has retired from his work as a carpenter but still works in his church. Vincent reports leaving school at age nine and going to work to support his mother and siblings after his father left the family. Since the 1960s, Vincent has participated in five ABE programs. At the time of his first interview he had been at CLC for approximately seven months after leaving five years earlier.

Anna is in her forties and has 3 adult children. At the onset of data collection, she had been attending CLC for “about a month.” She had enrolled at CLC two times prior, once in 2005 for "about 3 months" and again in 2008 "for about a month". Anna reports having never attended school as a child. She was kept at home to care for younger siblings while her mother worked.

Daisy is the mother of six adult children. Daisy is in her sixties and earned her GED approximately 4 years prior to data collection. She reports having taken one class at the local community college after earning her diploma. She then returned to CLC because she was still not happy with her own ability to read. Daisy is not a traditional ABE
student; she has already reached her learning goal. Data collected from Daisy is limited to her experiences in ABE prior to having earned her GED. Prior to earning her diploma, Daisy attended ABE programs offered at two local high schools. She reports spending "3 or 4 years" in one program, then attending the other for "3 or 4 years", and then returning to the first for approximately 2 years. She also reports taking the GED exam multiple times.

Walter is 66 years old and has seven adult children. He is married and reported still working part time doing window repairs and other "glass work." He has done this work for over 40 years. At the time of data collection, Walter had been attending CLC "off and on about two years", with his longest stop out lasting "maybe two months." A stop out is marked by attrition that proves temporary, while drop out refers to a permanent departure from the learning setting.

Frank is in his late forties. He is married, has three adult daughters, and works in an automotive shop. During data collection, Frank was enrolled at CLC for the second time. His first enrollment lasted only a few months, and was followed by a lengthy stop out. Frank had never been enrolled in another ABE program.

Table 1 provides a summary description of each of these participants.
Table 1

Participant Profiles

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Prior Education Level</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Carol</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>Completed High School, no diploma</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vincent</td>
<td>76</td>
<td>Left at age 9, no grade level specified</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anna</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>No formal education</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Daisy</td>
<td>68</td>
<td>Earned GED</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Walter</td>
<td>66</td>
<td>3rd grade</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Frank</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>11th grade</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Data Collection

Data collection took place during the Spring and Fall of 2010. All data was collected with the informed consent of the participants and in compliance with the protocol approved by the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at the University of Memphis.

In accordance with acceptable standards for rigorous qualitative inquiry, data was collected from multiple sources (Denzin and Lincoln, 2005; Merriam, 1998; Yin, 2003). Interview data has been triangulated by data collected from the focus group(s), artifacts, the research journal, field notes, and ongoing member checks. A more detailed description of each data source is provided below.

Interviews

“At the root of in-depth interviewing is an interest in understanding the lived experiences of other people and the meaning they make of that experience” (Seidman, 1998, p. 9). Qualitative interviews are most useful for examining participants’
understandings of their lived experiences. Interviews contributed to my ability to obtain an emic, or insider, perspective on the issues being examined (Fontana & Frey, 1994). Over the course of this study, I conducted two face-to-face interviews with each participant.

The interview protocol used in the initial interview consisted of open-ended questions related to the following: 1) the participant’s expectations upon entering the ABE program; 2) experiences while enrolled in the adult learning program that they elected not to complete; and 3) the individual truths that each perceives to constitute barriers to persistence. Predetermined questions for the initial interview are outlined in Appendix C. Questions are intentionally not numbered, as there was no predetermined order. The tone and syntax of these questions is intentionally informal. Beyond data collection, the aim of the initial interview was to establish trust with the participant.

Kvale (1996) and Merriam (1998) defined this type of interview as semi-structured. Predetermined questions were presented at the outset, with additional inquiry allowed to flow naturally from the conversation. This flexibility can lead a participant to provide deeper insight into experiences:

This makes the interview more honest, morally sound, and reliable, because it treats the respondent as an equal, allows him or her to express personal feelings, and therefore presents a more “realistic” picture than can be uncovered using traditional interview methods. (Alvesson & Deetz, 2000, p. 73)

Merriam (1998) warned that structured interviews are more likely to “get reactions to the investigators preconceived notions of the world” (p. 74). Fontana and Frey (1994) also maintained that semi-structured, face-to-face interviews facilitate observation of the
participant’s body language and confirmation of shared meanings between participant and researcher.  

Following the initial interview, focus groups and subsequent interviews were conducted with the primary purpose of expanding upon previously collected data. While I intentionally let all interviews evolve naturally, the intent was to explore, with participants, their lived experiences and other factors that they identify as barriers to consistent participation in ABE. Participants, therefore, determined the direction of the investigation according to their responses to predetermined lines of inquiry.  

Second interviews marked the culmination of data collection. They were conducted after I completed initial analysis of the data from the first, conducted an initial member check with each participant, met with focus groups, observed classes, and analyzed the data collected there as well.  

Lines of inquiry in the second interview were borne of data collected during the first interview and focus groups. For example, one participant stated in his first interview that he had once stopped out due to a separation from his wife, but did not go into further detail. In the second interview, he was asked to explain why that caused him to stop attending his ABE class. Other lines of inquiry came from observing learners in the educational setting. Several participants were observed to be reserved or withdrawn during instruction. I asked about this in the focus groups, but some learners did not respond. They were then asked individually in the second interview.  

Collection of interview data ended at the point of saturation. Saturation has been achieved when no new information emerges from data collection (Creswell, 1998.) In this study, this point was signaled by marked repetitiveness and overlap in the
participants’ responses. After second interviews and subsequent member checks, I deemed it unnecessary to conduct further interviews. This may be due in part to limitations in the participants’ language skills; they simply did not have the words to say anymore than they had already said.

Observations

Observations were conducted during the learners’ regularly scheduled instruction. Two participants were observed in the Computer Lab. The lab is located on the first floor of CLC and contains approximately 10 computers situated along the walls of the room. Two tables sit in the center of the lab, presumably to facilitate collaboration. The four others were observed in at least one of their literacy classes. Classrooms at CLC consist of long tables arranged in a U shape, so that all learners are facing one another and the whiteboard at the front of the room. Each room seats approximately 16 learners. Appendix D contains the Observation Protocol used in this study. The purpose of this instrument was to contribute to my considerations of learner disposition and structural factors that impact learner’s decisions about participation.

Focus groups

After all participants were interviewed for the first time and classroom observations were conducted, focus groups were organized with the assistance of the program manager. Every effort was made to schedule the groups during times when participants were at CLC for either class or tutoring. Five participants participated in two focus groups. One participant, Anna, was not available at either group meeting time. The same protocol was used for both groups. It can be found in Appendix E. This protocol contains just three points of discussion. Each was introduced by me, in a conversational
style, and participants were encouraged to speak freely, with me adding leading questions and points of clarification along the way.

The groups gave participants an opportunity to reply to and expand upon one another’s responses. They were more forthcoming in their interactions with one another than they had been in one-on-one exchanges with me. Creswell (1998) described focus groups as beneficial “when the interaction among interviewees will likely yield the best information, when interviewees are similar and cooperative with each other, when time to collect information is limited, and when individuals interviewed one on one may be hesitant to provide information” (Creswell, 1998, p. 124).

**Member Checks**

During a member check the participant “is asked to review the material for accuracy and palatability” (Stake, 1995, p. 115). Throughout the study, participants were asked to review and provide feedback on transcripts and observation data. Print materials were presented both orally and in writing to accommodate participants’ literacy deficits. The purpose of the member checks was to verify what was observed and transcribed, and to negotiate additional shared meanings with participants. In this way, participants “also help triangulate the researcher’s observations and interpretations” (Stake, 1995, p. 115). All member checks were conducted face to face.

**Artifacts**

Two types of artifacts were collected for the purpose of this study. Instructional materials were collected directly from participants. These included workbooks, class handouts, and samples of completed assignments. Also, print materials and web pages
published by CLC and other ABE programs in which participants were previously enrolled were reviewed and analyzed.

Research Journal

The research journal consisted of data that I recorded throughout the course of the study. Informal communications with participants were recorded here. I also used the journal to record follow-up questions and other points of clarification that arose during interview transcription or data analysis. The journal was used prior to member checks, to note specific data that I needed to clarify with the participant.

The research journal was also used to capture my personal reflections related to communications with participants, the research topic, and the research process itself. These entries provided helped me to more accurately reflect my own subjectivities.

Once the data set was complete, the journal was used to record my thoughts and observations during my initial review of the data set as a whole. Merriam (1988) describes this process as placing myself in “conversation with the data, asking questions of it, making comments and so on” (p. 131).

Field Notes

My field notes consisted primarily of observation data. Observations of participants that could not be captured in the interview transcripts, such as changes in body language and affect, were recorded here. In presenting my findings, the field notes were referenced in order to relate the learners’ affect upon making certain assertions.

Field notes also related my interactions within the learning setting with persons other than the participants, to the extent that these interactions are deemed relevant to the study. For example, the conversation in which the Program Manager explained to me
why staffers sometime hesitate to assign tutors to learners with persistence problems was captured in the field notes.

Data Analysis

“The right way to analyze data in a qualitative study is to do it simultaneously with data collection” (Merriam, 1998, p. 162). Initial analysis of data therefore took place immediately after the data was collected. To this end, interviews were transcribed as soon as possible following interviews, with the aid of a digital voice recorder and accompanying transcription software. I regard transcription as beneficial to data analysis, and therefore transcribed all data sources myself. Research journal entries and field notes were compared to the interview data immediately after they were recorded.

Throughout the study, data was analyzed using the constant comparative method (CCM) unique to qualitative research. This method “requires the researcher to establish and eliminate emerging themes while developing a data coding scheme” (Sealy-Ruiz, 2007, p. 51). Boeije (2002) discussed the CCM in terms of two distinct, yet interrelated, activities: fragmenting and connecting. Following data collection, and transcription in the case of interview data, I began by identifying key phrases and ideas that emerged from the data. Each of these was assigned a code. “The process of fragmenting lifts the coded pieces out of the context of the interview as a whole” (Boeije, 2002, p. 394).

Boeije (2002) suggested a systematic process by which to make comparisons. Given the design of this study, comparison of codes took place at two levels: 1) within the specific data source; and 2) across the data set. Codes emerging from an interview transcript, for instance, were first compared with other codes from the same transcript. Second, these codes were compared with codes taken from other data sources from the
same participant, the field notes, the research journal, and the member check. Then the data was compared across participants.

Once data from each source was analyzed in this way, related pieces were then re-connected into categories and, and categories organized into themes (Boeije, 2002). It was a process of pulling the data apart and then putting them back together in more meaningful ways. Also, it allowed me to establish patterns and look for correspondence between two or more categories” (Creswell, 1998, p. 154). A final member check with each participant was conducted to ensure that negotiated meanings were preserved and accurately represented.

Once themes were identified, I constructed a descriptive representation of the case. This representation, the findings of this study, is organized in part according to the three types of barriers identified by Cross (1981). I deemed this to be the clearest and most understandable means of relating this data.

Researcher Subjectivities

“Qualitative data are the result of an encounter in which the subjectivity of all partners plays a part. The data cannot be situated in a context that exists independently of the researcher” (Guesquiere, Maes, & Vanderberghe, 2004, p. 174). The data I collected and the meaning that I make from it cannot be separate from the perceptions and values with which I undertook the research. Stake (1995) emphasized the “great privilege and obligation” (p. 49) of the qualitative researcher, among them the freedom and responsibility to explore and disclose individual subjectivities related to the research topic.
I approached this dissertation with seven years’ experience as a middle school teacher, an adult literacy volunteer, and a third-year faculty member at a church-related, historically black college. Since its onset and partly because of this research, I have taken on teaching Developmental Reading at a community college in the same city where the study was conducted. My interest in conducting this investigation was borne of two distinct yet interrelated aspects of my personal history.

The first is my family history. It is well known among members of my family that neither of my maternal grandparents could read nor write. Though they are both deceased, the effects of their illiteracy persist. The most obvious of these effects is the fact that my mother, the ninth of their 10 children, has borne two names throughout her life. Her parents named her Glory Dean, and this name is still used by family members and long time acquaintances. Then there is her legal name, Flora Dean, recorded by a nurse at the time of her birth because neither parent could record the name they had selected. Family lore holds that the nurse changed my mother’s name simply because she did not like the name that my grandparents had selected. Whether or not this is true, my mother’s two names have been the prevailing impetus for my interest in the experiences of adults with low literacy like my grandparents.

The second impetus for my interest in conducting this research comes from my experiences with African American parents and caretakers while teaching in economically disadvantaged neighborhoods in a large Midwestern city. I observed many parents who struggled to reconcile a lack of basic academic skills with the desire to support the learning of the children in their care. This aspect of my subjectivity is closely related to my view of literacy as a family construct. It also coincides with my belief that
educational attainment is the most viable means for African Americans of low socioeconomic status to overcome economic hardship.

These subjectivities were identified as a result of a peer debriefing. A peer debriefing is an interview in which the researcher takes on the role of study participant. A colleague who is familiar with the study, a fellow doctoral student, developed interview questions to expose my subjectivities related to the research topic. Peer debriefing is particularly advisable in qualitative studies because of the inherent role of researcher-as-instrument (Spillet, 2003, p.37).

An additional subjectivity was uncovered in the course of the study. I have a tendency to show deference in my interactions with older African Americans. I am inclined to address them as Ma’am or Sir, am careful not to interrupt when they speak, and tend not to contradict them. These behaviors are more the result of my upbringing and socialization than a reflection of my regard for individual persons. It is impossible to ascertain the extent to which this tendency affected my interactions with participants or others in the research setting.

Reciprocity

As a researcher, I have benefitted from my participants willingness to be interviewed and observed, and to share artifacts relevant to my study. I also benefitted from the efforts of staff members in the research setting who have invested their energies and insights into providing me access to potential participants, and even those who have merely tolerated my presence as an interruption to their work. Reciprocity entails the researcher’s efforts to give something back, to ensure that the people who make research
possible also benefit from it. It is a key aspect of ethical qualitative research (deMarrais, 2004; Marshall & Rossman, 2010; Seidman, 2006).

The researcher’s obligation to extend reciprocity to research participants is tantamount. DeMarrais (2004) maintained research participants can “benefit from having someone listen to and appreciate their views and experiences” (p. 61). My participants indicated that this was the case for many of them, because they had never had opportunities to discuss their experiences. More tangibly, I provided refreshments during focus group meetings, and offered my personal assistance to participants when they asked me or the need was evident. Two participants requested that I serve as their tutor until individual tutors could be assigned to them. I met with the two for five sessions and later debriefed their new tutors on our efforts. The exchange that facilitated this act of reciprocity is detailed in my findings.

DeMarrais (2004) also suggested that many qualitative research participants “benefit from building a relationship with the researcher” (p. 61). In conversation outside of the research context, one of the study participants expressed a fear in enrolling in college, certain that she would not fit in there. I invited her to visit my class at a local community college, which went a long way to allay these concerns. I also committed to guide both she and her son through the college application process and their applications for federal financial aid.

In the interest of extending reciprocity to the research site as well, I became engaged in improving CLC’s tutor training. Volunteer tutors participate in a 10 hour training prior to being assigned individual students or small classes. The trainers, also volunteers, are long-time CLC tutors. The program manager initially asked that I observe
the training sessions, and make suggestions as to how the training might be improved. After submitting my recommendations in writing, I met with the staff and trainers, also at the Program Manager’s request. My work with the trainers involved collaborations to modify existing training content and modeling new teaching strategies to deliver the content. I also conducted a part of the “Sensitivity” session at two training sessions. In addition, I have served as a substitute tutor on four occasions, as the need arose.

Reciprocity in this study has taken on many forms and has been fluid, having no distinct beginning or ending. The provision of refreshments was the only tangible act of reciprocity planned in advance of data collection. All others flowed naturally from my presence in the research site, and from my communications with others in that setting.

Summary

This multiple-case study was conducted from an interpretivist theoretical framework. Within this framework, it is the goal of the researcher to accurately represent the participants’ perceptions and the meanings that they assign to their experiences. Data sources included interview transcripts, field notes, the research journal, and artifacts collected from the participants. Data was analyzed using the constant comparative method, which involves comparisons across the total data set. Findings represent the themes emerging from these comparisons. Ongoing member checks, to include a final exit interview with each participant, ensured that findings accurately reflect experiences and assigned meanings as expressed by participants.
Chapter 4

Findings

Miz Teacher turn around say, ‘Have a seat’. I stays standing at door. I swallow hard, start to, I think I’m gonna cry. I look Miz Teacher’s long, dreadlocky hair, look kinda nice but kinda nasty too. My knees is shaking, I’m scared I’m gonna pee on myself. (Sapphire, 1997, p. 39)

This excerpt from the novel *Push* illustrates one learner’s terror as she enters an adult basic education program. Despite difficult life circumstances and the belief that she cannot learn, she is compelled to participate by the desire to increase her opportunities in life and be able to care for her children. While the novel presents an extreme, dramatic representation of the challenges faced by adults with low literacy, the findings of this study support the tenet that decisions about participation take place amid a sea of obligations, perceptions, and experiences.

Like the novel’s main character, Precious Jones, learners in this study entered ABE programs with specific goals in mind, recognizing that ABE was the first step toward achieving those goals.

Reasons for Attending

Carol attended high school through the 12th grade. She did not receive a regular high school diploma at that time because she did not pass the state mandated exit exam. Instead she received a Certificate of Attendance, awarded to students who do not demonstrate academic proficiency in the core content areas. Her goal for participating in ABE was to earn a regular high school diploma, and go on to college. She was motivated
by a desire to emulate others. “Being around a lot of people that is very smart and educated, I’m wanting to be just like them.”

Vincent was not interested in earning any academic credential. “I’m not looking for diplomas or nothing like that. I just want to get over the hump, get to where I can read and write.” Vincent was motivated by a desire to read the Bible and be able to locate its verses in print, rather than relying solely on memory.

Anna’s goal was to first build her reading skills, and then to earn her GED. She was motivated by a desire to become a minister. “When I finish here I want to go to Bible school. They have like a church school, a minister school.”

Daisy was the first adult learner I had ever encountered who had already earned a GED but remained enrolled in adult literacy classes. Daisy was motivated by her desire to keep up in a rapidly changing world. “The world is constantly changing and you gonna have to change with it. If not you are going to be left behind.” Daisy is the only study participant who also participated in another form of adult education not related to employment. She “also went to some school to take up flower arrangements.” *Take up* is a colloquialism meaning to learn or to study.

Walter’s stated goal for participating was simply “to read better.” Like Vincent, he was not interested in seeking a GED or any academic credential. “At my age it simply doesn’t matter to me anymore.” Rather, he described his motivation as a desire to complete everyday tasks, such as reading his own mail, without assistance.

Frank did not articulate a specific goal for his educational attainment, but expressed a desire to remove perceived limitations. “Street sense and everything else I got. Knowledge in a book I do not have. If I had the knowledge in a book I would be a
millionaire right there.” He identified his family as his primary motivation for participating in ABE. “First of all I got a beautiful wife, beautiful daughters, and myself. That’s what motivates me to get mine, ‘cause once I got mine can’t nothing stop me.”

Perceived Barriers

Most learners in this study had clear motivations for seeking ABE instruction. All of them recognize its potential to impact their lives and increase their opportunities. Still, they found it difficult to persist to completion of their goals. Cross (1981) separated barriers to participation into three categories: situational, dispositional, and structural. Dispositional barriers are internal to the potential adult learner and include attitudes toward education and perceptions of oneself as a learner. Situational barriers are external to the learner and include life circumstances that affect potential learners’ participation decisions such as the cost of enrolling in adult learning programs, lack of access to child care costs, or lack of family support. Structural barriers are those created by the adult learning provider, such as failure to disseminate information about available adult learning programs or failure to offer programs that align with learners’ needs and interests (Merriam & Caffarella, 1999). The three types of barriers provide a framework for examining the experiences and circumstances that have been the impetus for participants’ decisions to leave ABE programs.

Dispositional Barriers

The majority of codes that emerged from the data were identified as dispositional barriers, or barriers related to learners disposition toward learning and themselves as learners. Dispositional barriers explicitly identified by participants related to feelings of low self-efficacy and shame. Participants also brought race to bear, as it impacted their
perceptions of themselves as learners. Unrealistic expectation on the part of one learner is deemed a dispositional barrier. Aspects of learners’ spiritual lives also impacted their participation decisions.

Self-efficacy. Self-efficacy refers to one’s perception of his or her own abilities. Four of the learners in this study identified self-efficacy as a barrier to sustained participation. Daisy described herself at times as “tired and disgusted” because she “just couldn’t get it.” Fred and Carol both described themselves as deficient when compared to others. Fred lauded his abundance of “common sense” but doubted his intellectual ability. “I ain’t as smart as you are, but I got something.”

Carol described what appeared to be deep-rooted feelings of low self-efficacy. Carol made statements such as “I don’t understand why it’s so hard for me to get” and “I been this way since I was a little girl” that demonstrated a negative perception on her own abilities that connect to her early educational experiences. Carol reflected on her own struggle with self-perception, “I think what hindered me is I got that word in my mind, can’t, and I keep it in my mind and I ain’t never gonna do it.” She described her inability to perceive when she does something well in the academic setting. In one of her former classes at CLC, the tutor required students to make oral explanations in front of the class. “They all say I speak well, and I say ‘no, I don’t speak well.’” Carol viewed herself as “not smart and not educated”.

Walter attributed his learning difficulties to an undiagnosed learning disability. “Seems like I got a learning disability. It bothers me on some stuff.” Walter contrasted his academic ability with his tactile ability. “Picking up stuff and doing stuff, I’m good with stuff like that. So I wonder why I can’t read so well.” Feelings of low self-efficacy
were a manifestation of how these learners view themselves. Shame, on the other hand, was a product of how they believe others perceive them.

*Shame.* Like low self-efficacy, shame was a pervasive aspect of these learners’ experiences. Every participant expressed feelings of shame and described acting out of shame in various situations. Carol was most explicit in expressing her feelings of shame within the learning environment. “I’m still not where I’m supposed to be. I think my level is a 6th grade level now. I am still ashamed.” The others echoed Carol’s sentiment. Collectively, their shame manifested in attempts to hide their low literacy by remaining silent.

Field notes from classroom observations yielded codes such as “only speaks when spoken to” and “no interactions with peers”. Four of six learners in this study were virtually silent during instruction. Victor and Daisy were the only learners in the study that interacted regularly with peers and their tutors during my observation. Carol explained that she had been silent in the ABE classes she stopped attending because she was afraid to ask for help because of what her peers might think. “I’m afraid that if I say I don’t know it then it might be people in their that’s a little more advanced than we are, and they might be like ‘Well, I already got it.’”

Beyond the classroom, four of the six participants reported hiding their low literacy and their participation in ABE from others in their lives. Frank’s described the parameters of his silence.

I’m pretty quiet about my lifestyle. I mean, you know, I’m not educated and I don’t like to get into that. Me, personally, I don’t like for nobody to
know. It don’t feel good to me and that’s why I been private. Now in my house, they can know, but outside my house, no!

Still, he reported that his low literacy was hidden from his daughters until they were adults. Every learner in the study except for Anna believed that their children were aware, at least to some extent, of their literacy problems. They had not told them explicitly, though. “I think they just about figured it out,” Carol said of her sons.

Daisy reported mixed reactions from family members and close friends. “Some of them you got is supportive, and some of them don’t want to see you do nothing.” Daisy was more concerned about the perceptions of what she called “outside people”. Daisy shared an experience of being surrounded by more educated women in a former workplace. “We all was working, and they in this government job. And everybody talking about ‘I went to this school, and I did this and I did that. And me, I just be quiet.”

Vincent, too, expressed concern over being found out in his workplace. As an associate pastor, he feared it may compromise his position of authority. “The only people I’m worried about is at the church.” His concern was that others would question his knowledge of the Bible because he could not read it. Because he teaches biblical concepts to others, he felt strongly that he “ought to know how to read something.” Vincent was indifferent to the reactions of others outside of his church. “I’m not doing it for them.”

Walter likewise expressed indifference about the reactions of others. He denied hiding his low literacy or participation. “I never had no problem with that.
I don’t let nobody hinder me.” Anna also revealed her participation to friends and family members. She described their reactions as “excited” and “happy.”

Race. Race emerged as a potential dispositional barrier in this study. Three participants identified being African American as a sort of hindrance to their learning. Walter illuminated a belief that his race was somehow a deficiency. “I was mistreated when I was born ‘cause I was born black.” He felt his race somehow weakened him. “You know we aint never been very strong,”

In a focus group, Carol and Vincent discussed race and socioeconomic status as barriers to educational opportunity.

Vincent: I thought all white folks could read. But now since I’ve started reading a little bit I done found out some of them didn’t know how to read. But they getting help from their other people that did know how to read. Or they write a letter for them or do whatever they need to do.

Carol: And they got big money to pay [Sylvan] and them to teach them how to read.

Vincent: And I’m like how did they learn to read so quick and I still didn’t know how?

Carol extended her previous self-assessment to other African Americans as well.

“We stuck on that word, can’t, and they not.”

Spirituality. Spirituality also emerged as an aspect of disposition that affects African American adult learners. Three of the six learners in this study perceived their participation decisions as being impacted by spiritual perceptions. Walter identified spiritual struggle as a barrier to persistence. “The devil is going to push something out there in your path to see how weak you are.” Daisy made a similar sentiment. “The devil tried to tell me, ‘You don’t need that stuff.’” Anna posited her participation as an act of defiance against spiritual attack. “I want back what the enemy stole from me, so I’m
gonna try to get it.” Among African American Christians, *the enemy* is a common reference to the devil.

**Structural Barriers**

Three categories of structural barriers were identified in the data set: materials and instruction, the role of the tutor, and learner placement. The material instruction category includes codes related to curricular concerns, what is taught and how. The role of the tutor is discussed relative to its impact on learners, as described by the participants in this study. Learner placement is a product of the administrative functions of the various ABE settings in which these learners have been enrolled.

**Materials and Instruction.** Artifacts collected during this study included handouts, worksheets, and workbooks used in adult literacy classes. All of these instructional materials were used by participants in their study at CLC, either currently or in some time past. None had saved materials from any of their other ABE classes. Appendix F contains a representative sample of these materials. In both form and content, there is no discernable difference between them and materials that would be used with children of the same ability level.

It is also of note that culture is nearly non-existent in the artifacts collected. I failed to identify any reference to African American cultural norms. In fact, there was no overt reference made to any culture group in any of the instructional materials given to me by participants or those used in the classes I observed. The one possible exception to this is the inclusion of a character in one of the reading selections named “Kim.” The picture that accompanies the selection could be interpreted as depicting a woman of Asian descent. Within these materials there are also occasional images that depict males

Learners did not explicitly identify problems with learning materials as a barrier to participation. However, in describing the experience of reading an entire book for the first time, Carol laid bare the nexus between the appeal of reading materials and learner motivation:

I read my first book, and it was about that thick! It taken me a long time to read it cause I’ll read a chapter a night. I forced myself to read a chapter a night! And I was so surprised; some of the words in there I did know. Because I liked that book and I was focused on that book. But it’s hard for me to read something that I’m just…that I don’t care nothing about. And I’m trying to get through it and I done read this sentence and read this chapter. Then you ask me what I just read and I be like “I don’t know.”

Carol was referring to *In the Company of My Sisters: Black Women and Self Esteem*, a self-help book by African American educator and therapist Julia A. Boyd. The book makes consistent reference to African American cultural norms, and is written for adults.

Artifacts collected in this study included reading selections about space travel, pet shops, shopping for a birthday gift and camping trips. Worksheets consisted primarily of fill in the blank and matching items, most related to vocabulary or a wide range of grammar skills. Classroom observations yielded a heavy emphasis on grammar instruction, including one class where students spent over an hour taking notes on the proper use of adverbs.
*The Role of Tutors.* Tutors at CLC receive instructional material from the staff and use these materials to plan their own instruction. Tutors have more contact with adult learners than anyone else in the learning environment. Based on the experiences related by study participants, tutors play a key role in participation decisions.

Tutor treatment of learners was identified as a barrier to ongoing participation. Carol related the following experience in an ABE class that she had already considered leaving:

> It was an incident that helped me make my mind up. She asked me to read out loud in the class. My reading wasn't good and she told me to stop. Then she asked another girl to finish reading. We was the oldest ones in the class I think. She read good, better than me. I felt like I was used as an example to the rest of them. That kind of distracted me, made me feel kind of bad.

Carol says that she did not even stay until the end of that class session. She left when the class was dismissed to take a break, and never returned. “She’s a good person but she don’t understand that little thing she did to me, that’s what made me not want to be taught in her class again.”

I observed one of the participants while she engaged in computer based instruction in the computer lab at CLC. When the participant posed questions about words that appeared in the lesson, the tutor responded with the following: “You know what scissors are, don’t you?” and “You know what a customer is, I know.” The learner did not respond to either. The tutor offered no further redress to the learner’s inquiry.
These responses constituted the only verbal exchange between the participant and the tutor during my observation, which lasted approximately 40 minutes. There were two other learners in the lab at the time. The tutor never addressed either of them during the observation.

In another class that I observed, the tutor entered the classroom approximately five minutes after class was scheduled to begin. She did not address the learners. Rather, she continued a call on her cellular phone in which she described renovations being done on her home. The call continued for six minutes after her arrival, during which learners talked quietly among themselves.

Some tutors were inattentive learners during instruction. In two of the classes I observed, the tutors dominated class discussion to the extent that approximately half of the learners in each class never said anything—to either the tutor or their peers—during observations that lasted approximately 45 minutes each. In one of these classes the tutor diverged on three occasions, relating long personal vignettes that did not connect to the instruction in any way that I could surmise.

Vincent pointed out the need for tutors to ensure that all learners are engaged in instruction. He lamented that tutors often only talk to the learners that are most vocal. As a result, they fail to check for learning among other students before moving on to new material. This causes some learners to get left behind. “It’s a lot of people in the same shape I’m in, and they be looking around trying to find out… I might could help them but then I’m gonna miss the next thing too. It go a little too fast. Because one somebody answers the question and he go ahead on.” Vincent implied that tutors rely on one learner to speak for the group. “Somebody done answered it. Then he feel good: ‘I’m
teaching’. But it’s a lot of them that’s left out.” Vincent identified this failure to engage him, or check for his learning, as a potential barrier. “What keep me motivated is me learning something.”

Carol contrasted her past programs to her most recent experiences at CLC. “The other programs that I left wasn’t good teachers that will…that target certain people that didn’t know.” She contributes a lack of academic progress to a lack of individual attention. “I wasn’t able to comprehend as good over there like over here, because over here they will help you, like even one on one.” Carol related an experience in one of the programs that she left and the teacher’s subtle resistance to students who stay after class looking for help or clarification.

If you go up to them after class they will, but with so many people standing in line and waiting out there waiting to ask them something, this one teacher, they might be like okay this class is over you know. But not trying to run but you know what they’re thinking. They’re already getting their little papers and stuff together, and then there’s all these people standing up here waiting. So they're like just kind of telling you real real quick and kind of brushing you off. Then you still leaving out of there like I don’t think I got a good understanding of what was going on cause they'll say it real real fast.

Carol contributes her recent ability to persist at CLC to the willingness of her classroom tutor to provide her with individual attention, as well as her work with an individual tutor. She says of the programs she left, “They don’t help you with the one on one tutoring.”
Learners in the study also attributed some of their negative experiences in past programs to tutors’ failure to demonstrate effective classroom management. Carol blamed one tutor for spending too much time addressing the behavior problems of younger learners. “The teacher should go ahead and do what they supposed to do.” Likewise, Daisy perceived that the tutor in one of her past ABE programs did nothing to allay the teasing she endured at the hands of younger peers.

Learners in the study also recognized the positive impact of their tutors. Daisy claimed that a tutor can impact learner disposition by being accessible to learners and treating them as equals. “It does help because it make you feel more comfortable, you know, because some of them can be real snobbish,” claimed Daisy. Anna also viewed her tutors as a positive support. “They were very nice and they was helpful to us and they had patience.”

Unfortunately, positive interactions with tutors can also lead to attrition. Walter pointed out that one tutor’s failed persistence had been a barrier for him. “Before I left the last time my tutor left me.” His attribution for his tutor’s absence illuminates a close personal bond between the two of them.

Last time I was coming my tutor left. I didn’t leave. She left. I’d call her. I never did get no call. [A staffperson] called her. She never did get no answer. She just dropped out. I don’t know what happened. I think I know what happened but I’m not sure. But I think she was dating a kind of young guy. She liked the guy but the guy didn’t really…you know how that is. Sometimes you get your mind too set to go into something too
quick. I think that kind of did a lot to her when that guy just really backed off of her.

At the time when his tutor left, Walter’s only engagement in ABE was his work with her. He was not enrolled in any classes at that time. “I had got to like her, had got comfortable with her.” This finding supports the finding of my pilot study, in which the learner stopped participating in ABE after a tutor with whom he had formed a close relationship was no longer available to tutor him.

The learners’ perceptions of their learning environments were not limited to their instruction and their interactions with tutors. Constraints imposed by ABE programs were also cited as barriers to learners in this study.

Learner Placement. All of the six learners who participated in this study identified problems with the instructional delivery options that were available to them. Daisy and Carol both reported dissatisfaction with being placed in classes with students that were much younger than themselves. “I was an older lady and I look around and it’s nothing but a bunch of little children, teenagers, and here I am the oldest old thing in here.” In describing her experiences at an adult learning program offered at a local high school, Daisy implied that younger learners made fun of her: “I couldn’t even hardly read and I’d look at somebody and they look back at me giggling.” Carol related a similar experience in an ABE program offered at a different high school:

At [the school] it’s a lot of young kids in the room and some adults in the room and the kids are back there like (loud, exasperated sigh) and “Aw Lord.” I might need a little more help and they back there talking and the teacher stop. And they might even get into it ‘cause he’ll get mad and
have had to put some kids out. I don’t know if they’re there because their parents are making them go or what.

Get into it is a colloquialism that means to start a verbal or physical confrontation. Carol also spoke of being afraid to report behavior that she found distracting. Younger students in the class described above talked and laughed loudly, and were often using cell phones and other electronic devices in the classroom. Carol did not report their behavior, even though she found it distracting. “I couldn’t move because if they found out something was said about a cell phone, they’d know it was me.”

This experience took place in Carol’s third ABE program. She described the curriculum there as “a little too advanced” for her. She had entered that program after leaving CLC because she was placed in a class that she felt was too easy, “almost like 3rd grade work.” Her second program was the one where the teacher embarrassed her, described earlier. Ultimately, she returned to CLC. Carol paints a clear picture of how she was affected by being placed in classes that were not a good fit for her:

All those years I been getting by just going to the job faking it, I got tired.
I got tired of it, so I came here and asked for their help. So they placed me in a class where I didn’t feel I was getting the help that I needed. So I went and enrolled into another school. That teacher made me feel kind of stupid. So I went and enrolled into another school. I did not quite understand what the teacher was saying. I didn’t know what to do, so I came back here.

Upon returning to CLC, she was placed in a different class than she had been the first time, and assigned an individual tutor.
Walter would have preferred not to be placed in a classroom at all. “I don’t like it. When you in a classroom all the focus go all over the classroom.” He related adult classes to his experiences as a child. “That’s just like when I was going to school when I was like in first grade. I didn’t like that either but I went.” Walter preferred to work with an individual tutor. “When you have a tutor you can pick up stuff a lot faster when all the focus goes on one person. It’s gonna take a lifetime in class. I’m gonna be done died before they get to me.”

**The Student/ Tutor Balance.** Walters assertion points to two potential structural barriers. The first is tutor availability. Many ABE programs, like CLC, rely on volunteer tutors. There are often more learners in need of tutors than there are tutors available. The second is the struggle of program administrators to balance the unpredictable participation of learners with the need to keep tutors actively engaged.

One participant, Anna, was only receiving computer based instruction at the time of data collection. Her abrupt stop outs in the past had led to frustration on the part of the tutors with whom she had been assigned to work. Because she had only recently returned to CLC, and her past stays had been so brief, administrators had decided to delay assigning her an individual tutor. Anna was excited about working in the computer lab. “They had computers here and I didn’t never know how to use no computer.” Still, she expressed a strong desire to participate in other forms of instruction: "I want to take classes again and I do want to take the tutor, too, maybe once a week." Anna juxtaposed this experience with her first time enrolling at CLC when they had assigned her a tutor “about a week after I came through the door.”
Once a learner is assigned to a tutor, the two select a mutually agreeable time to meet at CLC, usually one or two times per week. When a tutor is assigned to a learner who does not persist, or even one with poor attendance, they are often not notified that the learner will not be present for a session. Learners often fail to notify anyone in advance of their impending absence or nonparticipation. The tutor reports to CLC in anticipation of a tutoring session and waits for the learner to arrive. When they don't arrive after a reasonable time period, a staff member tries to contact the learner. Some tutors will experience this for two to three scheduled sessions before they stop reporting. When a learner has demonstrated a persistence problem, program administrators must consider the effect of poor attendance or nonattendance on the tutor.

Two other study participants related circumstances similar to Anna’s. They were both enrolled in classes but had not yet been assigned to individual tutors. This ultimately led to my tutoring them for a short period of time as an act of reciprocity for their participation in the study. Excerpts from the focus group transcript demonstrate their frustration.

Vincent: It’s just we aint getting nothing out of it. We just answering the questions. I thought it was something like…I need something to uplift me.

Simone: What would you…

Vincent: Well, that’s what we come here for, for help.

Simone: What are you asking me for? I’m still not clear.

Vincent: I’m not asking for anything. If we come here and spend our time into this, then you would know well enough to know—well I can’t speak for anybody else—but what I’m looking for out of it. The main thing is I am coming here to learn something. I thought you were some kind of teacher or something, to learn us something.
Fred: See look, once I was already taught and done learned what you call yourself knowing, and I have the mind like you got and know what you know, then I wouldn’t need you at all. I’ll take that same thing what you done taught me and teach somebody else. That’s what I’m here for.

Fred demonstrated his belief that those who have what he called “book knowledge” have a responsibility to share it with others. When I still did not understand what was being asked of me, Vincent used an analogy to clarify.

Vincent: I don’t mean to cut you off…look…see I’m a carpenter. Can you build a house?

Simone: No, sir.

Vincent: Can you tear this building down?

Simone: No, sir.

Vincent: I can tear this building down and I can put it back up. But it would be mighty funny for me to say I want you to come meet me in this room over here and tell me… I got a box of nails over here. Where this box of nails supposed to be at? Where you gonna put it at and how you gonna put it? And all you know about it is it’s a box of nails. And you need to know what you gonna get out of it. And you spending your time.

Through this hypothetical Vincent relayed his frustration with being asked to spend his time telling me about his experiences, while I had the ability to help him—as he would have the ability to use the nails properly—and was not doing so. Finally, Frank drove the point home for both of them.

Frank: What he was trying to say, you didn’t catch it. We need a tutor and you are not working around the clock. You can be his tutor.

Simone: Is that what you were trying to say?

Vincent: I said I need a tutor.

Fred: See you didn’t catch it.

Simone: No, I didn’t catch it.
I worked with the two men for 3 weeks, until the next tutor training, at which point the Program Manager assigned them both individual tutors. We had five tutoring sessions.

Both men have been enrolled at CLC in the past, and failed to persist within this program. Therefore, their frustrations with current circumstances in the program were deemed potential barriers to their continued participation.

The participants in this study each had different reasons for being dissatisfied with the instructional delivery options they had been given. Daisy and Carol found cross age grouping within classrooms to be a barrier in past programs. Walter preferred individual tutoring, but was attending classes in the interim. Anna, Frank, and Vincent were satisfied with the types of instruction in which they were enrolled, but desired a wider range of instruction. They had all been assigned to their instruction based on their own needs, their schedules, and factors related to the structure such as limited tutor availability and limited class times. There were also many factors outside of the learning environment that affected learners’ participation decisions.

**Situational Barriers**

Participants in this study identified situational barriers that fall into two distinct, though sometimes overlapping categories, family obligations and health problems. They reported being affected by their own health problems, as well as the health problems of family members. One learner also identified employment as a barrier.

**Health Problems.** The first time Anna left CLC, it was because she had been diagnosed with breast cancer and needed to undergo treatment. The physical effects of her illness and the treatments made her unable to attend classes or work outside of her home. “I wasn’t able to hold up ‘cause of the cancer.” Similarly, Daisy had to delay her
return to ABE because her eyesight was adversely affected by diabetes. “My eyes almost went blind.” Both women enrolled at CLC after being treated for their illnesses to the point that they no longer perceived physical limitations.

Vincent reported periodic health problems as his primary barrier to continued enrollment in ABE. “Every time something come up that cause me to drop out. It wasn’t just me going and got disgusted or nothing.” Vincent came to CLC for the first time almost 20 years ago and attended regularly for “about 5 years. He then fell off of a ladder at work and did not seek immediate medical attention. This ultimately resulted in his being hospitalized for injuries related to the fall, and he stopped attending classes. After returning to CLC, Vincent faced another health problem. He was diagnosed with a bloodclot, hospitalized again, and again stopped attending classes. Vincent attributes his last stop out two years prior to data collection to the onset of seizures. Vincent ascribes current learning difficulty to his past health problems.

It have a problem with me now. You know when I be trying to speak some words and stuff like that, and I be kind of absent minded and something like that. But now that I came back, reading and all, I’m doing a little better. I was thinking I had just about lost it all.

Vincent expressed concern over whether he could overcome the perceived cognitive losses that he attributes to his health problems. “I don’t really know if I can get up where I was at that time or not. I lost a lot of memory.”

*Family Obligations.* Vincent identified other barriers related to family. Although he originally began attending ABE programs almost 50 years prior to data collection, he had stopped out multiple times. He attributes the first of these stop outs to the death of
his sister in the 1960s, at which point he left a program at a local high school that he had been attending for approximately three months. “I had been there three months, but they said I had made sixteen months progress.” Years later, while attending CLC, he stopped out again after separating from his wife. “When something happened like that I didn’t feel like going back at the time and maybe I stayed out a little longer than I should.” Following this stop out, Vincent began attending a program at a local junior high school and participated for “about a year”. At that time his father died and he left that program.

Daisy also identified her role in the family as a barrier to persistence when she attempted to pursue her GED while her children were still school aged. She recalls encouraging her husband, who also lacked a high school diploma, to attend classes with her. Because her husband was the head of the household, “I told him you need to go if I don’t go.” Daisy’s husband did not attend. His response to her enrollment can best be described as passive resistance.

He felt alright because he didn’t have to do nothing. I was working. I had to come home, wash before I go to school at 6:00. If I didn’t wash for the kids before I go—because I didn’t have clothes enough for them to have changing clothes—so I had to wash something every night so they’ll dry the next morning, or I’ll iron them dry. So it didn’t really bother him. Daisy kept up this routine for “several months” and then stopped attending classes. She returned to her studies “when they all got grown and left home.”

For two of the learners in this study, the barriers of health and family intersected. They were unable to remain enrolled in ABE due to the health problems of close family
members. Frank recalled, “my beautiful wife’s eyesight, both of them went out.” He left CLC until his wife could undergo surgery for cataracts. For several months, his role in the family increased due her inability to complete tasks that had previously been her responsibility. Added to this was a series of medical visits to seek treatment for her. “It was so much I had to do because of my wife.” Frank returned to CLC following his wife’s surgery and recovery. “Now she can see and I’m the happiest man in the world now ‘cause she can motivate me and I can motivate myself.”

Similarly, the second time that Anna left CLC, she did so because her brother had fallen ill and she was charged with caring for him. Anna did not divulge the details of her brother’s condition, but stated that she was his sole caretaker “for months.” The time demands of this role made it impossible, she felt, to continue her studies.

Work. Walter was the only learner in the study who identified work as a barrier to his continued participation. He stated that once he started “coming good” for a while, his job began to give him excessive amounts of overtime. “You gotta work overtime on the nights you don’t want to work overtime. If they say you gotta work overtime, you gotta work overtime. So, now you can’t come today.” Walter explained that after missing several classes because of work, he was not sure he could catch up. “When you come back you gotta get adjusted.” He became “discouraged” and stopped out.

Learner expectations. Learners in this study varied greatly in terms the amount of time they expected it to take them to reach their learning goals. For one participant, Anna, unrealistic expectation emerged as a potential dispositional barrier. Though Anna was aware that she “didn’t hardly know how to read nothing” because she “missed out on a whole lot of stuff”, she expected her pursuit of a GED to take “about a year or maybe a
little longer.” Walter pointed out the danger in this, stating explicitly that some learners “get into stuff and we can’t get where we want to go fast enough”. He did not apply this to himself and it was unclear whether expectation had played a role in his past failure to persist. Other learners in the study had more realistic expectations. Upon their entrances to ABE, both Carol and Daisy expected that it would take them a long time to reach their goals. “I expected it to take me forever”, said Carol. Victor, too, expected a long tenure in ABE “I knew it was going to take me some time because I was so low.” Fred would not articulate any expectation, stating that his enrollment would “take as long as it take.”

Age

Age was identified as a barrier by three of the participants: Daisy, Vincent, and Walter. It emerged as both a dispositional barrier and a situational barrier. Daisy described the dispositional effects of aging among her peers in ABE. “When they get a little older, they afraid of changing.” While she separated herself from those afraid of change, she admitted to age having contributed directly to her participation decisions. “That make you drop out too, knowing you the oldest thing up in here and all these teenagers around you learning and they gonna learn faster than you will.”

Walter and Vincent pointed to age as a situational barrier. “See I got a lot of stuff to think about that I didn’t have to think about when I was young,” stated Walter. He cited having to “figure out” how to “take care of the family” after his impending retirement. Despite having stopped out many times, he joked that his participation in ABE would end “when I get too old to climb the steps.” Factors like age and health are not exclusive. Walter talked about aging in less than jovial terms because his hearing and vision had begun to deteriorate. “The sound of alphabets and stuff like that, I can’t hear
‘em as well as I used to. I can’t see as well as I used to. I can’t make the sounds out.” It is reasonable to conjecture that health related barriers increase as learners get older.
Chapter 5

Summary, Discussion, and Implications

This study had three purposes: 1) to identify experiences that African American learners associated with their decision to leave ABE programs; 2) to ascertain the impact of participants’ perceptions of participation in ABE relative to their self perceptions and individual learning goals; and 3) to examine the extent to which barriers perceived by participants were consistent with barriers identified in the literature.

This chapter consists of a summary of the study, analysis of the data collected and the resulting conclusions, and a discussion of the three research questions that guided this study: 1) What experiences do participants associate with past decisions to leave one or more ABE programs; 2) How do participants view participation in ABE relative to their self-perceptions and individual learning goals; and 3) Do participants perceive barriers other than those that have been identified in the literature? Data is analyzed as it relates to the literature introduced in Chapter 2, to include an analysis of participants’ experiences relative to Boshier’s Congruence Model, as the model relates specifically to the role learner self-perception as it relates to participation in ABE. The chapter closes with a discussion of the implications for further study that arise from this research.

Summary of the Study

African Americans are disproportionately affected by the effects associated with low literacy. ABE specifically addresses the needs of learners with low literacy, but participation in ABE by those that need it is low. African American adults are more likely than those from many other culture groups to be in need of basic literacy instruction. Those that do participate often fail to persist until they reach their learning
goals. At the outset of the study, the six participants were enrolled in the adult literacy program at City Literacy Center (CLC). One, Daisy, had earned a GED but continued to attend classes weekly. Another, Carol, earned her high school diploma during data collection. The other four were actively involved in various levels of ABE instruction, ranging from basic literacy to advanced literacy. What bound these learners was a history of inconsistent enrollment in ABE, or the past failure to persist in one or more ABE programs. None of these participants had ever participated in a qualitative research study before.

There is scant literature that specifically addresses the participation decisions of African American learners in the ABE setting, and none that addresses these decisions as made by learners in voluntary programs. Literature that described the experiences of ABE learners from traditionally marginalized populations indicated that marginalization and perceived racism in the learning environment were barriers to learner persistence. Learners’ self-perception interacted with their experiences to impact decisions about participation. The literature also illuminated the role of ABE instruction in shaping the ways in which learners viewed themselves. Researchers promote cultural relevance within ABE curricula, to include acknowledgement of the ways in which learners use language. Learners were also found to face barriers similar to those experienced by other ABE students. These include cost, transportation, scheduling conflicts, lack of child care, and lack of knowledge about available programs.

This study employed a multiple-case study design, guided by an interpretivist theoretical framework. The study setting was City Literacy Center (CLC), located in a large urban area in the U.S. region known as the MidSouth. Data sources included the
following: interviews, focus groups, classroom observations, artifacts, a research journal, and field notes. Data collected from these sources was further triangulated by member checks. All data was analyzed using the constant comparative method.

Finding of this study indicate that African American ABE learners’ participation decisions are impacted by a number of situational, dispositional, and structural barriers. Situational barriers identified by learners included health problems, family obligations, and work. Dispositional barriers included low self-efficacy, shame, and the belief on the part of some learners that their race contributed to academic deficiency. Learner expectation was also identified as a dispositional barrier. Structural barriers explicitly identified by learners included failed persistence among tutors, lack of individual attention, embarrassment in the learning setting, and dissatisfaction with instructional options. Additional structural barriers emerging from observation data included tutor treatment of learners, a lack of cultural representation within the curriculum, and an undue emphasis on grammar instruction.

Discussion and Analysis

Themes emerging from data analysis were organized according to the research questions. Experiences that learners associated with their decisions to leave ABE programs were captured within the themes of embarrassment, lack of individual attention, and traumatic life events. The role of learner self-perception in their participation decisions was discussed in terms of the following themes: self-esteem, age, and unmet learner expectations.
What experiences do participants associate with past decisions to leave one or more ABE programs?

Data in this study suggest that participants’ decisions to leave past programs are associated with experiences both inside and outside of the learning environment. Relative to the learning environment, themes of embarrassment and lack of individual attention emerged. Outside of the learning environment, the theme of traumatic life experiences encompassed the situational barriers identified by learners in this study.

Embarrassment. Learners described embarrassment in the learning setting, whether by a tutor or peers, as barriers to their continued participation. It was impossible to determine whether the embarrassment that learners suffered was intentional on the part of offenders. This, however, did not appear to matter. Carol’s experience with the tutor who used her as an “example” may have been a misunderstanding. It is within reason that the tutor believed she was alleviating Carol’s frustration or saving her potential shame by asking another student to finish reading the passage that Carol was reading aloud. This is of no consequence, however. Carol’s perception of the experience led her to leave the ABE setting immediately.

Daisy expressed embarrassment on multiple levels. She was embarrassed by the age difference between herself and her peers in the ABE class that she left, by being the “oldest old thing” in the class. She was also embarrassed when she thought that the other students were “giggling” at her. Other learners in the study identified strategies that they use, primarily silence, to avoid embarrassment in the learning setting. Silence is discussed in detail relative to the second research question.
Lack of individual attention. Learners also identified a lack of individual attention in the learning setting as a barrier to persistence. Victor cited instructors’ tendency to allow one learner to speak for the entire group when checking for understanding, inadvertently leaving others behind in instruction. Victor identified “learning something” as a key to remaining motivated, and expressed his displeasure with struggling to keep up with instruction because the tutor did not take the time to ensure that each individual learner had grasped the material before moving on. Sparks (1998) identified learners being left to figure out material on their own as a form of marginalization in the ABE setting.

Carol also named lack of individual attention as a barrier in one of the programs that she left. She noted the tutor’s subtle resistance to helping students one on one after class, and juxtaposed these experiences with the program in which she was able to persist to the completion of her learning goal. Being “pushed away” by instructors was another form of marginalization identified by Sparks (1998, p. 252). For Walter, the need for individual attention was best accomplished by work with an individual tutor. He stated in jest that he might actually “die” in class waiting for the tutor to attend to him while the tutor’s attention was required by so many students at once. In their desire to add individual attention to their current forms of instruction, Victor, Frank and Anna also demonstrated the belief that individual attention was necessary to maximize their learning outcomes.

Traumatic Life Events. Outside of the learning environment, traumatic life events such as death and divorce were associated with the decision to leave ABE programs. During Victor’s five separate periods of enrollment in ABE, he stopped attending
anytime there was a traumatic event in his life. Some of these events, such as his work injury and seizures, would have been prohibitive anyway. Other situations, however, such as the deaths of his sister and father, and his separation from his wife, appeared to have elicited strong emotional responses rather than imposing any physical limitations. “When something like that happened I didn’t feel like going back at the time and maybe I stayed out a little longer than I should.”

Similar to Victor, Annette and Frank associated traumatic life events with their decisions to leave ABE programs. Annette had prohibitive physical limitations when she was being treated for cancer, but during her second stop out, while her brother was sick, she did not. The same is true of Fred when his wife lost much of her vision to cataracts. This is not to suggest that physical limitations are more valid than any other reason for leaving. Rather it points to emotional strain in other areas of one’s life as a significant contributor to their participation decisions.

*How do participants view participation in ABE relative to their self-perceptions and individual learning goals?*

The relationship between learner self-perception, goals, and participation appears to be a complex one. Themes associated with this relationship included low self-esteem, unmet expectations, and the effects of age.

*Low self-esteem.* Learners low self-esteem was evident in three categories of this study’s finding: low self-efficacy, shame, and race. Findings made by Hall and Donaldson (1997) suggested that self-esteem and the ability to express oneself were positively correlated with adult learner participation. Learners in this study illustrated the
relationship between self-esteem and self-expression, as their low self-esteem often led them to become silent.

Learners’ choices to use silence as a strategy to hide their low literacy may cause them to experience additional barriers. Within the class setting, learners related experiences of being ignored as a potential barrier, but their silence in this circumstance is as significant as any action or nonaction on the part of tutors. Vincent and Carol both related experiences when they failed to raise questions despite not understanding what was being taught. Their silence therefore limited the tutor’s ability to meet their learning needs and inhibited them from engaging fully in instruction. It is impossible to ascertain the impact of this inability to communicate effectively with tutors. It’s noteworthy that these learners experienced low self-efficacy and shame even in the company of other adult literacy students. It also bears mention that learners did not recall using silence as a strategy when they worked with individual tutors.

Four of the learners in this study also used silence as a strategy to avoid shame when they were not in the learning environment. Learners related experiences of being ridiculed or betrayed by others who learned of their low literacy. For instance, Carol’s low literacy became evident to a former coworker. Feeling she had been found out, Carol confided in the woman. The coworker agreed to keep Carol’s confidence and help her when she had trouble with difficult tasks at work. Instead, the woman betrayed Carol and she lost the job.

I kind of thought that she really wouldn't tell nobody. She knew a secret.

I mean she knew a secret I been hiding. So that’s when I let my guards
And after I let my guards down she had got on the phone and called the boss from corporate and told him that I cannot read well.

Carolyn was fired for having lied on her application about having a high school diploma. Victor described being betrayed by becoming fodder for gossip among his friends. “You tell one, and the one talking to another one, and another one. Then other people knowing more about you than you do.” Hayes (1988) identified disapproval by friends and associates as a potential barrier to persistence.

Learners also confessed to hiding their low literacy from most family members. Findings made by Comings et al. (1999) indicated that family can play a key role in helping learners to persist. By hiding their low literacy, learners in this study may be limiting the potential impact of a resource that could provide them support and encouragement.

There appeared to be a difference across gender in learners’ self-perception. While all but one participant identified shame as a barrier, the three males identified areas of their lives where they were good at something, areas of high self-efficacy. Walter and Vincent, the older of the men, were proud of their professional accomplishments as skilled tradesmen. Walter boasted “God blessed me with a talent, and everybody aint gonna have it.” These men juxtaposed their professional accomplishments to the self-doubt they faced in the academic setting. Frank perceived himself as having a great deal of “street knowledge” and “common sense”, both of which are highly valued among African Americans. He therefore viewed participation as adding to his current knowledge, rather than perceiving himself as lacking knowledge in general.
None of the female participants identified any area of her life where she was good at something, or particularly proud of herself, where her self-efficacy was high. Annette was the only learner in the study that did not question her own ability to learn, but she also did not overtly demonstrate high self-efficacy in the way that male participants did. Belenky (1986) described the difficulty some women face with seeing themselves objectively. “They find no vantage point outside of the self that enables them to look backward, bringing the whole self into view” (p. 32). This study’s findings support Belenky’s assertion that objective self-assessment is particularly difficult for women who live in silence.

Learners in this study perceived race as a detriment to their learning. Walter associated being African American with weakness and misfortune, pointing out learners’ perceptions that they are somehow deficient because of their skin color. Vincent believed that low literacy was somehow the result of being a member of a minority group. Even after he learned that some White people also lacked literacy skills, he assumed that they received more support from friends and family members than their black counterparts. Carol implied that being African American placed some limitation on her access to resources that could address her literacy problem.

Findings from earlier studies implied that learners from traditionally marginalized populations desire learning environments in which their culture is recognized and honored (Cervero & Sandlin, 2003; Flowers, 2000; Ogbu, 1983; Sealy-Ruiz, 2007; Sparks, 1998; Wax and Wax, 1971). Participants in this study appeared to view being African American as a deficiency and a hindrance to their progress, rather than something to be celebrated in the learning environment. Critical race theorists hold that African
Americans are often inundated with so many negative images of themselves and their cultural norms that they have difficulty viewing either positively (Crenshaw, Keller, Gotanda, & Thomas, 1995; Ladson-Billings, 2003).

The one exception to learners’ negative perception of their own race was Carol’s experience of reading an entire book for the first time. The fact that she enjoyed the book and saw positive representations of African American women within it inspired her to overcome her reading challenges and complete it. But Carol did this on her own time outside of the learning environment. She maintained that, while in the ABE setting, she never read an entire book written for adults and she did not recall being aware of reading anything by an African American author. Carol’s investment of effort and time in reading the book supports Sealy-Ruiz’s findings that adult learners respond to materials that relate to their cultures and lived experiences, and that they are concerned with the depictions found in these materials. Still, Carol did not “problematize” the lack of cultural representation in her ABE classes, as Sealy-Ruiz (2007) suggested adult learners should in the absence of cultural representation within the curriculum. Rather, she appeared to accept it as the status quo and did not raise any question or overt complaint.

Unmet expectations. Participants recognized the correlation between their participation and achievement of their goals, whether the goal was to go on to college or simply to read proficiently. There was some evidence in the data, however, that participants had unrealistic expectations of how quickly these goals could be reached.
Annette, for instance, appeared to be setting herself up for such disappointment by expecting to earn a GED in just a year.

Kerka (1995) pointed out that ABE programs often fail to give learners adequate information about programs, which leads to failed persistence. There is no data in this study that suggests that Anna or any other participant was misled in this way. It was apparent, however, that no one in the ABE program or elsewhere had effectively communicated to Anna what she should expect of herself and the amount of time it may take her to reach her learning goal. Kerka also identified slower than expected progress as a barrier to learner persistence (Kerka, 1995).

Age. Data collected from Daisy, Walter, and Vincent indicated that age impacted how learners perceived themselves and their attitudes about participation. They were impacted by many of the same barriers as their younger peers and had to also contend with the cognitive and physical effects of aging. It is impossible to know to what extent older learners are impacted by aging, versus the extent to which they perceive deterioration due to changes in their perceptions of themselves.

Changes in self-perception were evident among the older learners in this study. Daisy repeatedly made reference to being older than her peers in the learning setting, assumed that younger learners would learn faster than she would, and viewed participation in ABE as a means to combat being left behind in a changing world. Victor perceived that failing vision and hearing, coupled with his health history, made it more difficult to learn and retain information. Walter made the assumption that at some point he would simply be too old to participate in ABE.
Learners’ self-perception did not appear to be positively impacted by their participation. Daisy continued to participate in ABE because she did not feel her reading skills were adequate even though she had passed the GED exam. Carol described still being ashamed of her reading level, even after reaching her first stated goal of earning a high school diploma. Other learners in this study also did not appear to view themselves in more positive terms after their participation. While they acknowledged some learning gains, they did not appear to see themselves as any more capable than before.

*Boshier’s Congruence Model.* Boshier’s Congruence Model addresses the nexus between learner self-perception and the learning environment. Like Cross (1981), Boshier (1973) proposed that adult learner participation is the result of interaction between psychological and environmental factors. The model is “based on the assumptions that participation and persistence in adult education are determined by how people feel about themselves and the match between the self and the educational environment” (Merriam & Caffarella, 1999, p. 62). Boshier asserted that the variables associated with adult learner attrition are the same as those associated with participation. Simply stated, the reasons that some people leave programs are the same reasons that some choose not to ever participate.

Findings from my prior research on the participation decisions of an African American male ABE student support the use of this model in exploring the participation decisions of learners from traditionally marginalized populations. The basis for Boshier’s model is the distinction of potential adult learners as either deficiency motivated or growth motivated (1971). Boshier argues that deficiency motivated learners are driven primarily by external environmental factors, while growth motivated learners are driven...
by self-concept and internally-held attitudes. While one might argue that Boshier has oversimplified this distinction, learner motivation as a predictor of ongoing participation is key to understanding the experiences of learners in Adult Basic Education (ABE).

Aside from correctional settings and mandatory welfare-to-work programs, learners are seldom compelled by external forces to participate in ABE. Like CLC, most programs are voluntary. Individual reasons for enrolling therefore become tantamount in shaping learners’ perceptions of the environment.

Boshier (1973) found “that dropping out was a function of the cumulative effect of self/other incongruence which initially resides within the participant” (p. 274). Self/other incongruence refers to the learners’ evaluation of the self relative to other adult learners, evaluation of the self relative to the instructor in the adult education setting, and/or evaluation of the self relative to other aspects of the learning environment. Coupled with mediating variables, the failure to persist is the result of these incongruencies (Boshier, 1973).
Figure 1. Boshier’s Congruence Model

Boshier’s (1973) model hinges on individual motivations, the reasons a learner enters adult education from the beginning. Mediating variables are circumstances that could become barriers, but don’t have to. Adult learners’ perceptions dictate whether a mediating variable becomes a barrier to participation or not. A learner that Boshier would describe as deficiency motivated is more likely to develop intra-self incongruence, or a sense of disconnect between him or herself and the learning environment. This learner is more likely to perceive these mediating variables as barriers. A growth motivated learner perceives intra-self congruence, or a fit between him or herself and the learning environment. This learner will not perceive mediating variables as barriers, and will choose to participate or to persist.

In its simplification of the relationship between the learner and the environment, Boshier’s (1973) Congruency Model holds particular promise for explaining the reasons that potential adult learners from traditionally marginalized populations avoid or discontinue participation in adult learning programs. My own prior findings, and those of other studies, appear to confirm that learner participation is a function of the way the learner views himself relative to the adult learning environment.

Within the findings of this study, self/other incongruence is found in the many of the factors cited by participants as barriers to sustained participation. Incongruence between learners’ perceptions of themselves relative to their learning goals is evident, as is incongruence between learners and others in the learning environment.

Carol stated her reason for participating was that she wanted to be like people who she viewed as “smart”. This is an external motivation which would mark Carol as a deficiency motivated learner. Although Carol eventually reached her goal, she failed to
persist in three programs before doing so. The first time Carol enrolled in CLC, she perceived incongruence between herself and the class she was assigned to. She did not persist. When she went to the first program offered at a local high school, she perceived incongruence between herself and the teacher who embarrassed her. She also viewed the class as being too difficult for her. She did not persist. She then went to another program where incongruence existed between herself and her classmates, and she left that program also. Low self-efficacy was likely the mediating variable that became the impetus for her decisions to leave. Once she returned to CLC, she was placed in a class that she perceived as being right for her and given an individual tutor. This led to a perception of self/other congruence in this setting, and she persisted to completion of her goal.

Daisy’s experiences also seem to support Boshier’s findings. Her motivation for participation was an internal desire to “keep up” in a rapidly changing world. When she was enrolled in ABE while her children were still school-aged, the mediating variables that impacted her were likely her obligation to family, her husband’s failure to provide adequate support, and her low self-efficacy. In her first program she felt as though younger learners ridiculed her, an example of self/student incongruence. Therefore the mediating variables became barriers, and she failed to persist. When she returned to ABE for the third time at least one of her mediating variables had changed. The time required to care for her children was no longer at issue because they were now adults. She also reported no incongruence with other students or any other factor in the learning environment. She was able to persist until the completion of her goal.

Vincent was driven by external motivation related to his work in the church. He felt compromised in his leadership role and implied that others would be justified in
questioning his capability because of his low literacy. His sporadic participation over the course of several decades was impacted by a number of mediating variables: deaths in the family, separation from his wife, a work injury, and the onset of some physical problem that caused him to have seizures. He stopped out each time he was confronted with one of these variables. Vincent’s experiences, therefore, supported Boshier’s (1973) findings. His deficiency motivation led him to perceive incongruence between himself and his peers and instructors. This incongruence subsequently led him to repeatedly perceive mediating variables as barriers, ultimately resulting in his failure to persist.

Walter appeared to have a growth orientation. He stated explicitly that his decision to participate in ABE was the result of his own desire to read independently, that he did not allow outside influences to affect him. He has stopped out of CLC several times over a fourteen year period. He also identified self/other incongruence within the learning setting. One example of this was when the tutor to whom he had grown attached left him. Another would be his enrollment in classes despite his preference for working with an individual tutor. Work was the only mediating variable that he explicitly identified. It was unclear as to whether he viewed age as a mediating variable, or whether there were others at play. His failed persistence may therefore, be the result of his perceived incongruence coupled with mediating variables, but no definitive conclusion could be reached.

Annette entered ABE because she did not have the academic skills to pursue her dream of becoming a minister. Her motivation appeared to be internal, marking her as growth oriented according to Boshier (1973). The first time she enrolled, she perceived congruence in the learning environment and was pleased with getting a tutor so quickly.
She attributed both of her stop outs to situational barriers, her own health problem and then her brothers. Boshier’s Model does not appear to account for physical limitations like the one’s Annette experienced during her own treatment for cancer. Her brother’s illness, however, would be a mediating variable. It should not have led Annette to stop out, according to the model, because she perceived intra-self congruence within the ABE setting. Annette’s experience, therefore, does not align with Boshier’s findings.

Frank did not specifically identify any areas of incongruence between himself and the learning environment during his first enrollment at CLC. He cited only situational barriers related to his wife’s illness and the additional obligations that it placed on him. Boshier would identify these as mediating variables. The data does not suggest, however that these variables became barriers due to some perceived incongruence. Like Annette, his decision to stop out does not appear in line with Boshier’s findings.

Limitations of Boshier’s Congruence Model. Findings made by Garrison (1987) dispute the relevance of Boshier’s (1973) Congruence Model to the decision-making of potential adult learners. Garrison called into question the study upon which the model was based, which included only continuing education students at a university. The purpose of Garrison’s study was to determine the extent to which incongruence, as defined by Boshier, affected the decisions of students in a high school completion program. Findings of Garrison’s study indicated that adult learners who perceived self/other incongruence were more likely to complete the education program, a direct contradiction to Boshier’s proposition. The limitations of Boshier’s model result from what appears to be over-generalization. Boshier does not distinguish adult learners based
on the types of programs they consider or their individual characteristics, other than their motivation upon entry.

Boshier’s (1973) model accurately predicted the participation decisions of three of the six learners who participated in this study: Carol, Daisy, and Vincent. It appears likely that the model also accurately predicted Walter’s participation decisions, but his lack of candor about some of his experiences makes it impossible to state this conclusively. For two of the learners in this study, Frank and Anna, Boshier’s Congruency Model did not accurately predict their participation decisions. These learners were both impacted by traumatic life events, indicating some weakness on the part of the model in predicting the impact of situational barriers.

*Do participants perceive barriers other than those identified in the literature?*

Barriers identified in the literature included the failure to demonstrate of an ethic of care within the learning setting, and a lack of cultural competence on the part of ABE programs. Likewise, study participants cited a lack of attention and unsatisfactory instructional placement as barriers, as did prior studies. As they relate to self-efficacy in particular, the findings of this study support those of prior research in that low self-efficacy was identified as an aspect of self-esteem that impacted participation. This study’s findings, however, departed from prior findings in that gender differences colored learner’s descriptions of their own self-efficacy. Male participants’ self-efficacy was low as it related to their roles as learners, while female participants’ low self-efficacy appeared to be more generalized and not limited to their role as learners. Differences between the literature and the findings of this study also lie in the areas of perceived racism, language as a barrier, attitudes about classroom management and the
interrelationship of learner and tutor persistence. Silence, which Belenky et al. (1986) associated with female self-concept, was identified as a means of avoiding embarrassment by both males and females in this study.

In Chapter 2, I highlighted literature that specifically addressed the experiences of adult learners from traditionally marginalized populations. Perhaps the most marked departure from that literature was that learners in this study did not identify perceived racism as a barrier to persistence. In fact, the only time they mentioned race was in describing their own shortcomings or the ways in which they perceived Whites as more advantaged. While the data set suggested that participants were enrolled in learning settings that largely ignored cultural identity, learners in this study did not explicitly acknowledge that they perceived any learning environment as racist or discriminatory in any way.

This directly contradicts the findings of earlier researchers. According to Sealy-Ruiz (2007), absence of culture in the learning environment denies learners the opportunity to combat marginalization. Sparks (1998) claimed that learning environments that did not reflect the cultural history of the learners resulted in frustration and contributed to failed persistence. In the findings of Wax and Wax (1971), learners’ “flight” from the learning setting was the direct result of instructors’ attempts to replace the culture of students with their own, that of the majority group. Learners in this study did not indicate that the race or culture of instructional staff was significant in any way, nor did they express frustration at the lack of cultural representation.

Freire (1973) would attribute this to past dehumanizing experiences. To dehumanize is to steal one’s humanity. Freire contended that it is the inevitable result of
the oppression that is visited upon members of traditionally marginalized groups. The perceptions of learners in this study are likely limited by having experienced marginalization to the extent that they cannot conceive of environments where they are not marginalized. Learners who have been subject to a lifetime of dehumanizing experiences must “come to voice” before they can question the status quo (p. 18). What Freire describes is not so much an acceptance of marginalization as it is the failure to realize that an alternative is possible. It is likely that the learners in this study have not been conditioned to expect positive representations of themselves. They simply do not miss what they have never had.

One might argue that invisibility within the learning setting is, of itself, a form of marginalization. There is no reason to believe that CLC or other ABE programs intentionally seek to marginalize learners by making them invisible within the curricula. More likely, program staff and tutors are similar to learners in that they were comfortable with the familiar. Unless they had been exposed to culturally relevant pedagogy, they could not be expected to practice it.

Like participants in Flowers (2000) study, learners who participated in this study appeared more proficient in African American Vernacular English than they were in Standard English. This was evidenced by the interview transcripts. Based on my observations and the interview data, this did not appear to affect them adversely in the ABE setting. This contradicts Flowers’s (2007) findings. In her study, ABE instructors discouraged the use of the vernacular and failed to recognize it as a means of creating cohesiveness among learners. While there was no apparent effort on the part of program staff or tutors to honor or promote the use of the vernacular in this study, there was also
no overt rejection of it on the part of tutors. This was perhaps missed opportunity to foster cohesiveness among learners (Sealy-Ruiz, 2007).

Another departure from the literature is a difference in participants’ ideas about the role of classroom management in their learning experiences. Cervero and Sandlin (2003) were harshly critical of ABE classes where there was an “emphasis” on “rules, control, and proper behavior” (p. 257). Learners in this study, however, found a lack of rules and control in their classes to be a barrier. Two participants, Daisy and Carol, stated that tutors’ failure to address the disruptive behavior in classes played a role in their decisions to leave programs. These participants also expressed dissatisfaction with classes where there was a wide range of age groups. Shod (1995) cited learners’ dissatisfaction with class groupings that were excessively heterogeneous in terms of student abilities. However, there was no evidence in the literature that suggested heterogeneity of age groups as a barrier to learner persistence.

While the literature acknowledges the role of tutors in the participation decisions of adult learners, the correlation between tutor persistence and learner persistence is not addressed. Findings in this study, however, suggest an almost cyclical relationship. One learner in this study, like the learner in my pilot study, identified a direct causal link between a tutor’s failure to persist and his own. While tutors sometimes have other reasons for leaving programs—in my pilot study, the tutor was relocated for work—they sometimes fail to persist because the learners to whom they are assigned fail to persist. They are more likely to disengage if not immediately assigned another learner.

Much of the data collected in this study triangulates that of earlier studies of adult learners from traditionally marginalized groups. The differences cited herein might be
contributed to several factors. These include but are not limited to the culture of the city in which the study was conducted, the personalities of study participants, the relatively small number of participants, or even participants’ perceptions of me as a researcher. Differences may also be contributed, however, to the lack of literature that specifically addresses the participation decisions of African American ABE students in voluntary programs, and may point to characteristics and dispositions unique to this group.

Conclusions

There does not appear to be a prescription for keeping African American adults enrolled in ABE programs. Their decisions are as much a function of what happens outside of the classroom as what happens inside. They are also a function of what has happened before the learner ever entered the ABE setting, how those experiences impacted the learner’s self-perception, and the learner’s perceptions of interactions within the learning environment.

The findings of this study suggest that African American learners enroll in ABE because they are to some extent cognizant of the impact of their own low literacy. They view participation as a viable means to achieving their learning goals. Participants’ persistence was sometimes compromised by unavoidable circumstances that were unrelated to the ABE setting: work schedules, injury, or disease. At times, their failed persistence represented personal sacrifice for others. Examples of this would be caring for ailing family members or staying home to care for children. This study demonstrates that African Americans with low literacy are not a monolith. Nor do they embody the “lazy Negroes” stereotype that prevails in some ethnocentric rhetoric.
Their negative self-perceptions, however, made them vulnerable to negative experiences in the learning environment.

Implications for Further Study

*Humanistic Approaches to ABE*

As stated in Chapter 2, many ABE programs subscribe to behaviorist philosophies. Behaviorism is marked by teacher-centered direct instruction designed to impart prescribed skills and competencies. Humanism, on the other hand, is learner-centered. It values lived experiences as the backdrop of learning and promotes self-directedness on the part of learners. Learning experiences are driven by learners’ intrinsic motivations rather than prescribed learning outcomes. The desired end of humanistic instruction is self-actualization, that each learner should reach the peak of his or her individual potential (Maslow, 1970).

This study’s findings speak to the imperative for ABE programs to offer instruction that both reflects learner’s experiences and ties those experiences to learning outcomes. Freire (1973) explicitly distinguishes humanistic approaches from those that claim to be humanitarian, as humanistic approaches are not borne or egotism on the part of providers.

*Culturally Relevant Teaching*

It is impossible to know how much cultural competence in the learning environment may have impacted the participation decisions of these learners. Certainly many of the barriers they cited would not have been diminished by any change in the curriculum. But how can we begin to know if cultural representation within the curriculum impacts adult learners, if there is none. Some studies suggest that it does, but
there is of yet no literature on the use of culturally relevant teaching strategies in voluntary ABE programs.

*The Language Around Participation*

The findings of this study lead me to question how persistence is defined in studies of adult learner participation. Dropping out is distinguished from stopping out, but there appears to be a need for additional means of categorizing learner participation patterns (Amstutz & Sheared, 2000; Kerka, 1995). What about a learner like Carol who, in effect, shopped around until she found an instructional model that fit her needs in a setting where she was comfortable? There does not appear to be any real place for her experience amid the current discourse about ABE participation.

There appears to be a need to further understand how learners define participation and persistence, rather than the current reliance on researcher definitions. Walter provides a case of interest. He described his own participation as “off and on”, but maintains that he has not stopped participating at any point, nor does he intend to. Rather, because he intends to be enrolled until he can no longer participate, he attends as is convenient for him. This pattern indicates that some learners may not view participation with the same sort of urgency as do researchers.

Beyond the way in which persistence is defined: the study findings point to a need for further research in areas associated with the participants’ individual experiences, including the interrelated effects of literacy and health literacy as well as the experiences of learners with learning disabilities. There is also a need for further study of tutor and instructor training within ABE settings and the potential impact of culturally relevant teaching in voluntary ABE programs.
Health and Health Literacy

Findings of this study indicated that the health of learners played a significant role in their decisions about participation. Low health literacy has been identified as a result of low literacy among adults. Adults with low literacy cannot participate fully in their own health care, and they’re pursuit of literacy is sometimes compromised by their health problems. It is impossible to ascertain to what extent each impacts the other. There is a need for further investigation as to the correlation between the two, and how it can be navigated by service providers in both fields.

Adults with Learning Disabilities

Carol was the only learner in this study who had been diagnosed with a learning disability as a child. Walter speculated that he, too, had a learning disability, though he had never been formally tested. Nonformal ABE programs do not generally conduct any testing for learning disabilities and disclosure of a diagnosed disability is left to the discretion of the learner. It is, therefore, impossible to know how many learners in these programs have learning disabilities. There is a need for further study as to how their learning outcomes can be maximized in ABE settings, where there is often a reliance on volunteer tutors who are not trained educators.

There is also a need for policy considerations around funding issues related to ABE. Programs run by state and local agencies receive federal funding through the Workforce Investment Act. Nonformal programs, many of which are offered by nonprofit organizations, do not. All of these programs, however, receive an influx of learners who are seeking a GED to replace a Certificate of Attendance like the one Carol
received. Arguably, program resources are being strained due to the policies—and perhaps the failures—of public education systems, which are publicly funded.

*Tutor Training*

This leads to the issue of tutor training. Tutors and instructors in nonformal ABE programs are often people from widely varied backgrounds whose altruistic nature leads them to volunteer. Training is often brief, and cannot possibly address all of the needs of the tutors. At CLC, ongoing development of tutors has proven difficult to actualize, as many cannot make an additional time commitment beyond the time they spend with learners. When you consider that in order to become a teacher in a K-12 setting, one must earn a bachelor’s degree and pass multiple certification tests, the disparity becomes clearer. There is a need for programs to investigate how tutors can be best trained to meet the diverse needs of learners, while treating them with the respect and consideration that they deserve.

*But some of us would try to steal*

*A little from a book,*

*And put the words together*

*And learn by hook or crook.*

- Frances E. Harper

“Learning to Read”
References


Appendix A

Pre-Qualifying Questionnaire

1. Name:
2. Age:
3. How long have you been coming to (organization name)?
4. Have you been to a program like this—an adult learning program—before?

If yes:
5. Was that here or somewhere else?
6. What was the name of that program?
7. How long did you go there?
8. How long ago was that?
9. Did you decide on your own to leave that program?
10. Is that the only other time you were in a program like this?

If no:
11. What other program were you in?
12. How long were you in that program?
13. How long ago was that?
14. Did you decide to leave that program on your own?
Appendix B

Informed Consent

Introductory Remarks:

Thank you for agreeing to talk with me. Do I have your permission to record our conversation?

(Turn on recorder.)

You know that I am interviewing you as part of a research project that I am working on for school. It is necessary to have the informed consent of all human subjects before conducting research. This means that you have the right to understand the research in which you agree to participate. Before we begin the interview, I need to ask you a few questions to make sure that you understand what it means to participate in this study. First, I want to make sure that you understand that there are no right or wrong answers to my questions. I just want to learn about your experiences. Does that make sense? After the interview, I will do something called a member check to make sure that what I write is really what you told me.

Okay, please state your first name.

I won’t use your real name in my writing because its part of my job to protect your privacy.

Do you understand that you will not be paid to participate?

Do you have any questions about the research?

(Address questions)

Have I answered all of your questions about the study?

I have given you my telephone number and address. Do you understand that you are free to contact me in the future if you have more questions about this study?

You do understand that your participation in my research study will not have any effect on your participation in any adult education program now or in the future? Do you understand that you are not required to participate in this study? That you are free to withdraw your participation at any time?

Do you agree to participate?

Thank you. We are now ready to begin the interview. Do I have your permission to continue taping?
Appendix C

Initial Interview Protocol

Expectations
• What is your long term learning goal?
• How did you hear about your first ABE program?
• What made you decide to enroll the first time?
• How did you think your family would react?
• How did you think your friends would react?
• How did you think it would fit with your other obligations, like work and family?
• How long did you expect to be enrolled before you met your goal?
• What information did you get when you started?
• What did you think classes would be like?

Experiences
• How did attending the program measure up to your expectations?
• Describe an average day in the program.
• Describe how you were able to fit it into your schedule.
• What did you think of the curriculum? Of what you were learning?
• What did you think of the books and materials?
• Describe the instructor(s) in the program that you left.
• What was the class like? How did people get along?
• How were students treated?
• What made you leave the program?
• How do you feel about this decision now?
• What made you decide to enroll this time?

Perceived Barriers
• How have your circumstances and responsibilities changed since leaving?
• What would have to happen for you to stay in this program?
Appendix D

Observation Protocol

Participant: ____________________________ Date of Observation ______

Class † Individual Tutoring ‡ Instructor: ________________________________

Class Title or Topic Covered: ____________________________________________

Structural Considerations

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<th>Observed Circumstances</th>
<th>Yes</th>
<th>No</th>
<th>Not able to observe</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The setting is appropriate for instruction.</td>
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<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Lighting is adequate by the researcher’s estimation.</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>• The setting’s climate is relatively comfortable by the researcher’s estimation.</td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>• There is enough seating.</td>
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<tr>
<td>The instructor is punctual.</td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>The class/ tutoring session starts on time.</td>
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<tr>
<td>The instructor has necessary materials.</td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>The instructor appears amenable and responsive to learners.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Instructional materials are readily available.</td>
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</table>

Learner Disposition

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<tr>
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<th>No</th>
<th>Not able to observe</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Is on time</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Has all necessary materials</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Appears engaged while the teacher is speaking</td>
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<tr>
<td>Appears engaged while peers are speaking</td>
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<tr>
<td>Participates in whole group discussion</td>
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<tr>
<td>Consistently appears on task</td>
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<tr>
<td>Voluntarily responds to questions</td>
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<tr>
<td>Responds to questions when prompted</td>
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<tr>
<td>Appears on task</td>
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<tr>
<td>Completes tasks in a timely manner</td>
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<tr>
<td>Engages in informal interactions with peers</td>
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<tr>
<td>Engages in informal interactions with instructor</td>
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<tr>
<td>Engages in informal interactions with others in the learning environment (administrators, staff members, etc.)</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
Narrative Summary of Events/ Activities

Narrative Descriptions:

1. Learner engagement with instruction:

2. Learner interactions with peers:

3. Learner interactions with instructor:
Appendix E

Focus Group Talking Points

- Can you tell me about your motivations, what made you decide to come to school?
- What are the things that you believe got in your way once you decided to come back?
- Some of you have told me that you are secretive with your friends and family member. Why is this?
- Who do you tell about coming here, or to a program like this?
- I have noticed that some of you don’t say much in class, why is that?
Appendix F

Sample Artifacts

Review Long i and short i

A. Circle the word. Write the word.

1. kit kite
2. fin fine
3. dim dime

4. pill pile
5. pin pine
6. Tim time

7. rid ride
8. fill file
9. win wine

B. Write the picture names that have long i.
A BIRTHDAY GIFT
FOR LIZ

1. It is Tuesday. Kim is at the mall.
2. She has to get a birthday gift for Liz.
3. Kim sees a plain gold chain.
4. This is a good birthday gift for Liz.
5. Kim asks, "How much is this chain?"
“It is $25,” says the clerk.

Kim looks at her cash. She has $15. Kim can’t pay for the chain with $15.

The clerk tells Kim,
“You can put the chain on layaway.
Pay $10 for the chain today.
Pay $5 for the layaway fee.
We will hold the chain for 30 days.
You can come back and pay the rest.”

Kim doesn’t want to pay the $5 fee. She thinks, “I have cash in the bank. I don’t want to use layaway.”

Kim asks the clerk,
“Can you hold the chain today?”

The clerk says, “Yes. For 1 day.”

“Thank you,” says Kim.
“I will go to the bank and get cash.”
Write the word.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>birthday</th>
<th>chain</th>
<th>gift</th>
<th>mall</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>cash</td>
<td>fee</td>
<td>layaway</td>
<td>plain</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

1. Kim is at the ________________.
2. Kim sees a ________________ gold chain.
3. The chain is a good ________________ for Liz.
4. Liz has a ________________ on Saturday.
5. Kim does not put the chain on ________________.
6. There is a $5 ________________ for layaway.
7. The clerk will hold the ________________ for Kim.
8. Kim will go to the bank and get ________________. 